

Libraries, sustainability and degrowth

Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not for every man's greed. Mahatma Gandhi. Quoted by his secretary, Pyarelal Nayyar (1958).

Only one Earth. Motto of the first Earth Summit.¹

Last year, the American Library Association (ALA, 2015) adopted the *Resolution on the Importance of Sustainable Libraries*; since then, other international organizations have been quick to go along with the proposal, reporting on the potential relationship between sustainability and libraries². However, such documents (which, in general, support the role of librarians in building “sustainable, resilient and regenerative” communities and making “sustainable decisions”) remain purely statements of intent that include a handful of trendy topics in their paragraphs, and fall short of being credible action plans. It is worrying to note that, despite the seriousness and urgency of the discussion, these statements tiptoe around a crucial issue — sustainability — that, so far, has not been addressed in depth by library and information sciences (LIS).

The following paragraphs are intended to confront the reader with the impossibility of unlimited growth in a finite biosphere, and are aimed at introducing the notion of sustainability and other concepts related to it — in particular “degrowth”, which remains ignored in many forums on sustainable development, including libraries. The article will also address the links that

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can be established among sustainability, activism, and libraries' services, activities and policies. The ideas presented here are meant to serve as starting points, guidelines or major strands to help readers search through international bibliography on an issue in need of urgent attention.

Introduction

Nothing is enough for the man to whom enough is too little.
Quotation attributed to Epicurus of Samos.

In the eyes of eighteenth-century Europeans, nature was a bountiful entity of endless life and fertility, ready to be exploited to satisfy mankind's needs, ambitions and, why not, (insatiable) greed. In those times of Industrial Revolution and deep social transformations, the planet and its ecosystems seemed capable of withstanding both the population growth required by a capitalist economy dependent on the accumulation of wealth, and the wild exploitation that would provide that economy with the raw materials it needed.

The plan — which has not changed in the past two centuries and has never observed any limits — consisted in exploiting renewable and non-renewable natural resources (especially minerals, energy and forestry) to feed a pattern of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services that soon proved unsustainable, both socially and environmentally. According to capitalist “rationale” and discourse, the ideas of “development” and “progress” would then remain bound to an unlimited growth — conventionally measured as the percent rate of increase in GNP — based on the availability of resources and cheap energy.

Today's strategy remains the same. But the eighteenth century world, with its 790-980 million inhabitants, was very different from the contemporary world, with a population of almost 7400 million people³. And the ability of nature to bear humans' ongoing assault over the last two centuries (but especially for the last 70 years) in pursuit of “economic growth” has decreased dramatically. This is explained by Daly (2008):

The most important change in recent times has been the growth of one subsystem of the Earth, namely the economy, relative to the total system, the ecosphere. This huge shift from an “empty” to a “full” world is truly “something new under the sun” [...] The closer the economy approaches the scale of the whole Earth, the more it will have to conform to the physical behavior mode of the Earth [...] The remaining natural world is no longer able to provide the sources and sinks for the metabolic throughput necessary to sustain the existing oversized economy — much less a growing one. Economists have focused too much on the

economy's circulatory system and have neglected to study its digestive tract [...] We have lived for 200 years in a growth economy. [...] we cannot continue growing, and in fact the so-called "economic" growth already has become uneconomic, increasing environmental costs faster than any production benefits, making us poorer not richer, particularly in high-consumption countries.

We are no longer living on an empty planet, but on a saturated one — absolutely exhausted and on the verge of collapse. Coates and Leahy (2006) summarize in two paragraphs the pressure the planet has been subjected to, the structural effects of extractivism, and the indifference displayed towards evidence of impoverishment, both environmental and human:

The review of ecological devastation, much of it occurring in the past 100 years, exposes our economy to be an "extractive economy". An extractive economy depletes non-renewable resources, exploits renewable resources beyond their capacity to survive, and causes irreparable damage to land, sea and air. Further, the production of toxins along with industrial and domestic effluent greatly exceeds the healing and regenerating capacities of the Earth. The Earth cannot cope with such excesses as human activity has changed the chemistry of the planet and altered the ecosystems upon which modern civilization depends. In fact, no ecosystem on Earth is free from the pervasive influence of chemical discharges. Accompanying this environmental impoverishment has been human exploitation and impoverishment.

Despite considerable information and public attention to environmental concerns, people at large and many businesses and governments have not been motivated to take these issues seriously and have not engaged in effective action toward sustainable practices.

Nature⁴ has not been the only one to suffer the harmful consequences of a reckless and abusive socio-economic paradigm. Global society (living humans) has suffered similarly devastating effects. The spread of insecure labor conditions, and the immense "reserve industrial army" that accompanies it — with hundreds of millions of unemployed, underemployed, and economically exploited people around the world — are not a fatality: they are one of the most visible outcomes of imposing such a model. Benach & Jódar (2015) provide a chilling and accurate description:

Today's world is experiencing an unacceptable labor situation grounded in unemployment, job insecurity and inequality. According to ILO

(International Labor Organization), there are more than 200 million unemployed worldwide, almost 1.7 billion working poor (less than two dollars a day), a countless and unknown army of people working in the informal economy, and what is even more terrifying, a minimum of 21 million slaves, the highest figure in the history of mankind.

Labeled as “disadvantaged,” all these people remain largely invisible to the rest of their fellows, and end up being discarded and thrown away like any other industrial waste. The gap between the “rich” and the “poor” has steadily grown since the 1950s⁵ while, at the same time, multinational corporations have further consolidated their economic power. More than a decade ago (2003) the ecosocialist essayist and professor of moral philosophy Jorge Riechmann wondered: “...on a planetary scale, does not an apartheid between rich and poor persist and worsen?”

In a world divided by inequalities and abysses, facing unprecedented ecological, social, economic and political crises, it is sheer madness to insist on the eighteenth-century strategy founded on the unlimited use of resources, continuous growth, and unbridled production. A suicidal madness.

And yet, the machinery keeps going: we continue to march on the *business as usual* path that is leading us to ecocide. As if they were possessed by the voracious *wendigo*⁶ spirits of the Algonquian myths, too many people in capitalist societies fail to see what is happening; others prefer to ignore the problem and still others deny its existence altogether. Consciously or unconsciously, many have chosen to tread the path of self-deception⁷, to forge ahead relying on technological patches that have not solved but rather masked or even shifted attention from the real problems — a headlong rush that will add its own share of adverse effects to the ecological and social crises we face.

Undeniable realities

There is denialism [...] when it comes to the ecological crisis as such, and in particular as regards everything that means accepting Earth's biophysical limits. In this broad sense, mainstream culture is undoubtedly denialist. Jorge Riechmann (2016, p. 32).

At least since 1972⁸ it has been internationally recognized that “industrial societies’ collision with the biophysical limits of the planet casts serious doubts on the possibilities of a decent human life in a habitable planet” (Riechmann, 2014). In 2008, Cairns pointed out:

Exponential population growth on a finite planet means less resources per capita, and humankind is dependent upon the resources of the

biospheric life support system for survival. However, humankind has acted, in the past, as if it does not recognize either of these obvious realities.

According to the summary of the preliminary results of the *Millenium Ecosystem Assessment*⁹, called for by the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2000 and initiated in 2001, the capacity of the world's major ecosystems (cropland, marine, forest, freshwater, desert and grassland) to provide elements and services that are essential to life (wood and fiber, water, biodiversity, carbon storage...) is in decline. This, together with climate change and the unprecedented increase in world population and pollution levels, is posing the greatest threat to global ecological stability ever known to humanity.

Some authors refer to this situation as “the Great Acceleration”¹⁰: the existence of an economy that consumes everything around it in a desperate attempt to continue growing, and of activities that, during the last 60 years, have transformed human societies, the planet and the relationship between them. Today, no one doubts that changes are happening at a vertiginous pace, but it is still difficult to accept that the crux of the matter lies in human activity.

The alterations induced by human beings since the Industrial Revolution have been of such a magnitude that some authors refer to our time as a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene¹¹. An epoch where the impact of human activities on natural systems can be found in practically everywhere, and changes occur at faster rate and a higher intensity than in the past, with unpredictable consequences for both natural systems and human societies. Thus, living in the Anthropocene means to develop in a context of intense, fast and overarching changes that outline a horizon of great uncertainty and unpredictability — a horizon that, in general, neither individuals nor institutions are prepared to face (González, Montes & Santos, 2008, p. 71).

One of the scholars who has put a lot of thought and effort into explaining what has been argued to this point is the aforementioned Riechmann:

The ecological crisis is not an ecological problem: it is a human problem. It has to do with anthropogenic global warming, over-consumption of resources by human societies, massive extinction of species, which is to a large extent the result of human behavior... The impact does not come from, let's say, the strike of a huge asteroid that would have collided, by some bad fate, with Earth (as we assume it happened in previous biospheric crises): we are the source of the impact. That is

why we should always talk about a socio-ecological or an ecological and social crisis. And we should always be clear that to emerge from the quagmire of the crisis, rather than “management” of natural resources or “management” of environmental crises, what we do basically need is human self-management. A different way to conduct ourselves — both individually and, above all, collectively (Riechmann, 2012).

In 2011, a group of seventeen Nobel laureates released a memorandum on sustainability that urged:

Humans are now the most significant driver of global change, propelling the planet into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. We can no longer exclude the possibility that our collective actions will trigger tipping points, risking abrupt and irreversible consequences for human communities and ecological systems. [...] We cannot continue on our current path. The time for procrastination is over (RSAS, 2011).

Maiso (2015), in the same vein and with the same forceful tone, expressed his worries at this “human-made” geologic epoch we are living in, though he would go a step further and insist that we are talking about human agency within capitalism¹²:

[...] we can expect nothing more from the development of capitalist society, nothing that is not destructive. [...] Very few people still think that the commodity society will bring welfare to everybody. Slogans like sustainability reveal that what threatens to destroy life on this planet are no longer accidents, wars or natural catastrophes, but the mere business as usual of planetary capitalism.

Signals are unmistakable. And yet, by ignoring scientific evidence and the warnings launched by numerous scholars, organizations, institutions and civil movements, many voices still insist on denying the undeniable: the unsustainability of the hegemonic system. They insist on minimizing capitalism’s effects on the planet and its inhabitants (see Radetzki, 2001) and on the possibility of freeing economic growth from the biophysical limits imposed by the biosphere (see Brock & Taylor, 2005), and the first and second laws of thermodynamics. At this point it is important to notice that the establishment denialism — which is even more striking when global warming is taken into account — has been (and is being) supported by research projects and studies largely funded by vested interests.

On the opposite shore of denialism, there is an extended family consisting of the many different ecologist, environmentalist, conservationist, etc. movements.

They can be regarded as a current of thought and action committed to protecting the planet and caring for its inhabitants, which denounces and opposes all forms of aggression against the environment, while working to prevent, stop or reverse them. While some of these movements are rooted in certain struggles and ideas of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries (return to nature, anti-industrialism, animal protection) and stems largely from the work and thought of Alexander von Humboldt or H.D. Thoreau, it can be said that the beginning of modern environmentalism — as it is understood today — was sparked by the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962. Among other things, that book succeeded in raising awareness and knowledge about environmental problems and how human activities affected the planet. Environmentalism, led by groups such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth, gained notoriety in the 1970s as part of the counter-cultural movement, and managed to put environmentalist issues on the global public and political agendas. Earth Day was established in 1970 while, at the same time, Lewis Mumford published the second volume of *The Myth of the Machine*; two years later the first United Nations conference on the environment was held; in 1979 James Lovelock published *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*; and in 1990, Barry Commoner presented *Making Peace with the Planet*.

In general terms, the environmentalist movement seeks to reconcile the human presence on the planet with the conservation of natural resources and the survival of all life forms. Most of their research, discussions and practices revolve around the concept of sustainability. Understood as “ecological viability”, sustainability considers that human activities (both economic and social) must not deteriorate in any way the ecosystems on which they rely. They must respect biophysical limits and act responsibly, thinking about the future. Sustainability brings together two concerns: one with the carrying capacity of natural systems, the other with the great social, economic and political challenges facing mankind today.

Despite the international weight of the ideas advanced (and the reasoning provided) by the environmentalist movement, little has been done to reduce humanity’s ecological footprint. We are running out of time and means to find (good) solutions to the current socioecological problems, the “window of opportunity” is a narrow one; in fact, in its 2013 report¹³, the Worldwatch Institute asked: *Is sustainability still possible?*

The idea of sustainability

I live if you live. The other has to live so that I can live. Nature has to live so that I, a natural being part of that Nature, can live. This is not a profit-and-loss calculation; it is a confirmation.
Franz Hinkelammert (2012, p. 74).

“Sustainability” is a long-standing concept that first appeared in print in the seventeenth century, in texts on forestry. After the publication of *Silent Spring*, the environmentalist community became more and more interested in the relationship between economic growth and development on the one side, and environmental degradation on the other. In his 1966 essay *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth*, British economist Kenneth E. Boulding stated the need for the economic system to be informed by ecological reality and its limited resources; in other words, to adjust to our planetary limits. The term “sustainability” was included in the first report of the Club of Rome (1972), and in 1980, as a specification of the idea of ecological viability, “sustainable development” was coined and identified as one of the “global priorities” in a report by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources).

Two years later, the United Nations World Charter for Nature¹⁴ set out five conservation principles that should guide human activities affecting nature. In 1987, the WCED (World Commission on Environment and Development), a United Nations committee led by Gro Harlem Brundtland, published the report *Our Common Future*. Known as the “Brundtland Report”, it includes the most widespread definition of sustainable development:

Sustainable development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”.

Since then, sustainable development has focused on achieving an environmentally sustainable and socially fair economic growth. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development published the *Earth Charter*¹⁵, which proposed the building of a fair, peaceful and sustainable society for the 21st century through an action plan called *Agenda21*.

In September 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*¹⁶, a set of 17 *Sustainable Development Goals* seeking to eradicate extreme poverty, and fight against inequality and injustice as well as climate change.

Based on the concept of sustainable development, the “green” or “environmentally friendly” marketing model was introduced: using terminology from the environmental movement, twisted disingenuously to capitalism’s advantage¹⁷. It was a facade attempt, disguised in alleged ecological concerns (Hezri & Ghazali, 2011), aimed at solving a small percentage of problems caused by the hegemonic system, without even considering the possibility of correcting or removing their primary causes. As a few voices warned at the time, the “green wave” not only failed to reduce the human impact on the planet, but made the situation worse by triggering new business opportunities.

Much has been discussed about what “sustainability” and “sustainable development” really mean. For the *statu quo* it is a “contestable concept, like liberty or justice” (Dresner, 2012): its definitions are flexible enough to accommodate to the context, the field of study or the interests at stake. However, authors such as Hermanowicz (2006) have very clear ideas and leave very few ambiguities when it comes to exposing them:

The principle espoused in the Brundtland report is quite clear. It calls for modifications of current human activities in recognition of their adverse effects on future generations. The “business as usual” scenario of global development would lead to severe adverse consequences in the future according to its critics.

Simon Dresner (2012) highlights the social and institutional aspects of sustainability (which demand to give proportional shares of “natural capital” to everybody) and points out that “sustainability is an idea with a certain amount in common with socialism.”

Sustainability continues to spark heated debate (see Lemonick, 2009, and Barnatt, 2013), and the notion itself is constantly put into question, especially by certain authors and research groups (ranging from ecological economists to ecosocialist thinkers, green scholars, political ecologists, and activists) who have long been working on what could be the outlines of a post-capitalist transition program. Convinced that without anticapitalist rupture there is no way to avoid a very dramatic outcome, all of them warn that the prevailing rhetoric on “sustainable development” only seeks new ways to perpetuate the current way of life — or, at least, the current lifestyle of a privileged human minority in the planet.

Such rhetoric, they argue, places the focus on economic progress and growth as key factors in human development, while “minimizing” their impact or negative consequences by introducing some corrective (and sometimes merely cosmetic) measures. But those adjustments, they add, would merely defer the problem to a later date. Besides insisting on the impossibility of a “green capitalism” (Tanuro, 2011), critics claim that the unsustainable hegemonic economic system seems to have rendered the idea of “sustainability” into officialese as a result of adapting it to its own needs and interests; that their advocates obstinately refuse to recognize and accept that there are biophysical limits to growth, let alone to admit that those limits have already been exceeded; and that all that come into their minds is a set of escape maneuvers: escaping the limits to economic growth, escaping from planet Earth, escaping human nature. As Riechmann put it in a recent interview (Rodríguez, 2015):

There is a lot of chit chat, a lot of green marketing, a lot of propaganda, a lot of images on display, stylemes and unwarranted appropriation of

contents. There is too much propaganda going around, too much trend-following distorting everything. Magazines sell us the concept of good life, while featuring full-page advertisements of big energy companies. That is what the dominant culture metabolizes as ecology, and it is very harmful because it has certainly nothing to do [with ecology], it is very far from what it ought to be, from what we should do.

As already mentioned, the most critical sectors unambiguously question the capitalist model of production, distribution and consumption: one that ignores all limits and pursues an ongoing growth, both extensive (colonization and commodification of public and private spaces, ecosystems, resources, the cosmos) and intensive (information technology, biotechnologies, nanotechnologies); they advise that neoliberal economic ideas threaten our life and our world; they seek recognition of the damage caused to the planet's ecosystems and the species that inhabit them (including humans); and they express the urgent need to do something (real) about it: in particular, to avoid future damages and to reverse the existing ones. Which leads to the profound change that society should undergo in order to achieve such a goal.

These voices have developed much of their theoretical work and their praxis around a series of issues such as (individual and collective) “self-limitation”¹⁸, an “ethic of sufficiency”¹⁹, the “steady-state economy”²⁰, “ecosocialism” “ecofeminism”, “biomimicry”, the “precautionary principle”, “ecological justice”²¹, and “environmental ethics”, to name a few. There is also an international network of researchers, practitioners and activists working on degrowth²² as a repoliticization of sustainability and as “part of a broader social movement which works on the hope that we can downscale in an equitable and democratizing manner”²³.

Degrowth

It is entirely up to us. If we fail, nature will simply shrug and conclude that letting the apes run the laboratory was fun for a while but ultimately a bad idea. Richard Wright (2004, p. 31).

Degrowth is a social movement anchored in ecologism, anti-capitalism and anti-consumerism. Basically, it proposes that there are biophysical limits to growth that have already been exceeded (causing an alarming exhaustion of natural and energy resources) and it is therefore necessary to drastically reduce the levels of production and consumption — these levels being the main causes of all environmental problems (climate change, pollution, threats to biodiversity) and of many social inequalities.

Degrowth does not entail a decline in fundamental human well-being. Much on the contrary, its proponents argue that a decrease in consumption would

create non-consumerist ways of life, much healthier in every possible way²⁴. It would also stop First World's neocolonialism: the massive and sustained use of global natural resources to maintain lifestyles that squander food and energy resources and generate huge amounts of waste, at the expense of the Third World.

Among seminal contributions concerning limits to growth and degrowth, the work by Romanian ecological economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen deserves special attention. *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (1971)²⁵ and *Energy and Economic Myths: Institutional and Analytical Economic Essays* (1976) are probably two of his most influential books. In the first one the author stated that Earth's carrying capacity — i.e. the planet's ability to sustain human populations and their levels of consumption — is doomed to diminish, since natural resources are finite and they are being depleted. In the second, he drew attention to the fact that “economic history confirms that great strides in technological progress have generally been touched off by a discovery of how to use a new kind of accessible energy”, and remembered that “according to the basic law of thermodynamics, mankind's dowry [i.e. free energy received from the sun, on the one hand, and the free energy and the ordered material structures stored in the bowels of the earth, on the other] is finite”, meaning that “in a finite space there can be only a finite amount of low entropy and that low entropy continuously and irrevocably dwindles away”. In his writings, the ecological economist stressed the fallacy of the notion that man can reverse the march of entropy, and concluded: “The truth, however unpleasant, is that the most we can do is to prevent any unnecessary depletion of resources and any unnecessary deterioration of the environment”.

In 1972, Edward Goldsmith and Robert Prescott-Allen, editors of *The Ecologist*, published *A Blueprint for Survival*. In that text they called for a rapid de-industrialization to avoid the planetary life-support systems' irreversible destruction. One year later, in *Small is Beautiful* (subtitled *A Study of Economics As If People Mattered*), E.F. Schumacher criticized the neoliberal economic system, pointing out that proposing a way of life and development based on capitalist growth and consumption is absurd. On the other hand, he advanced a new paradigm he called “Buddhist economics” — maintaining welfare while, at the same time, reducing growth and consumption.

By the year 2000, the term “degrowth” defined a current of socio-political action aimed at voluntarily and permanently downsizing the economy. The first international conference on the subject, Research & Degrowth, took place in Paris in 2008, and has been repeated every two years since²⁶. French economics professor Serge Latouche (author of *Farewell to Growth*) is currently one of the movement's leading intellectuals.

Today, many researchers agree that degrowth is no longer an option: the choice now is how to reach it. The Spanish anthropologist and environmentalist Yayo Herrero explained it in a recent interview (Batalla Cueto, 2015):

Q. There will be degrowth, that's for sure, and if it is not reached peacefully and progressively, it will be reached abruptly and violently.

A. Of course. Degrowth is not an option, there will be degrowth whether we like it or not. It is already here, the choice is about whether or not the degrowth in the material sphere of the economy, that is, being able to manage things globally using less energy and materials, is attained in a fascist way — and I say fascist because in the end each individual and each group living on more resources than those provided by its own territory, do so at the expense of other territories, stripping those territories of their resources and depriving other people of the opportunities to make a life for themselves. When Hitler said that the Aryan race needed a certain living space, and that if they did not have it within its borders they would have to invade other countries to get it, or when Bush, while bombing Iraq or Afghanistan, said “our lifestyle is not up for negotiation”, what was actually behind both sentences was the notion that some people deserve to have a certain lifestyle, even if it is built at the expense of others. That is fascism, and that is what we are heading for if we fail to create a movement or a current of opinion large enough to press for the necessary and inevitable degrowth in the material sphere of the economy in those places where consumption is highest. We must ensure an economic metabolism that sticks to the limits of what we have, and we must do it now, because we have already exceeded the planet's carrying capacity.

Spanish physicist Antonio Turiel, one of the main critics of endless growth, pointed out something similar in another interview (Álvarez Cantalapiedra, 2012), besides contributing supplementary terminology:

Q. Do you think that rhetorics such as those of the “transition”, “degrowth”, “slow” or “livingsimple” movements [...] can help us to move away from the extractive and consumerist economy that is at the root of our current problems?

A. Obviously, yes. But, in any case, I think it is important to stress that degrowth in relation to current levels, the simplification of systems, or the need to reduce our society's pace, are not only logical, but inexorable imperatives. In short: it is not an act of will; degrowth, simplification, slowing down are things that are going to happen whatever we do, because the opposite is physically impossible on a planet with dwindling resources and accelerated degradation. The only choice we are left is whether we want to pilot the process or leave it to

its own free will, letting social collapse to happen. Perhaps this is the most important message to convey: degrowth is not an option, but we can decide on whether or not to crash.

Sustainability and activism

Is it enough to have a critical consciousness — one you take out for a walk twice a day as you would do with your dog? No, it should be clear that it is not. There is little point in having a critical consciousness if it is not linked to collective action. What we need is critical consciousness in praxis contexts. Jorge Riechmann. Blog *Tratar de comprender, tratar de ayudar*. November 12, 2013.

In a 2004 article, Cairns describes the planet's and its inhabitants' situation as follows:

The twenty-first century represents a defining moment for humankind. This globally dangerous period of human history has two major threats: (1) overshooting global carrying capacity for humans and (2) major damage to Earth's ecological life support system as well as natural capital and the ecosystem services it provides. Should humankind fail to replace unsustainable practices with sustainable practices before the middle of the twenty-first century, this irresponsibility and lack of concern for posterity will probably result in global catastrophe. Humankind must repudiate some beliefs and alter its attitude towards technology and exponential economic growth. Technology can be extremely useful, but it cannot develop ethics or values — humankind can.

A result of irresponsibility and lack of awareness, this critical situation is denounced at international levels by many voices who, kindly or vehemently, oppose the current (unsustainable) paradigm and warn that the vision of capitalist economic progress is flawed; that consumerism is doomed; that oil production has already peaked; and that life as we know it is about to change significantly and, perhaps, irrevocably.

Those voices belong to activists. And their numbers and their strength increase day by day.

Activism is aimed at bringing about social, economic, political, educational or environmental changes that are tangible, in order to make improvements, prevent or solve problems or fill in the gaps in a society. According to Fuad-Luke (2009):

Activism is about [...] taking actions to catalyze, encourage or bring about change, in order to elicit social, cultural and/or political transformations.

Nowadays, activism takes many different forms, reflecting in part the undeniable influence of new digital technologies (a tool that provides new means and channels to establish links and to promote change proposals). Activists often carry out both individual and collective actions; in the latter case, they are usually connected to some kind of social movement, defined by Tarrow (1994) as:

Collective challenges [to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes] by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities.

Regarding sustainability and degrowth, although there is a “generic” activism (mostly linked to environmentalist movements), those who support them usually gather in special interest groups. These are created around specific issues, which may have either an anthropocentric (e.g. anti-poverty, etc.) or a biocentric approach (e.g. animal rights, etc.).

One of the main tasks of an activist is the information gathering, organization and dissemination about a certain topic. The distribution of such knowledge (through pamphlets, newsletters, zines, digital means...) is essential for raising awareness in a community (or in society at large). It also helps to create spaces for critical and informed debate, where possible actions can be discussed and organized. Actions can range from resistance and the launching of cooperative projects to civil disobedience, boycott, street art, hacking, demonstrations, strikes and many others.

Speth (2009) stresses that the first thing to do before moving into action is to face reality; in this specific case it means to know the truth about current environmental and social conditions (from global warming and climate change to loss of biodiversity and ecosystems, pollution, resource depletion, poverty, inequalities, etc.). At this point, and as noted above, quality information plays a crucial role in understanding what is going on, how, and, above all, why.

Libraries can — should — be part of those processes and movements, and they can do more than only being information providers to activist groups. They are able to take on many other roles, much more committed, even militant roles.

Activists and libraries, or an activist library

What is the use of an excellent academic curriculum in a 4° C

warmer world? Ferrán Puig Vilar. Los deberes de Casandra. Blog *Usted no se lo cree*. March 18, 2015.

We could replace “curriculum” with “library” and Puig Vilar’s quotation opening this section would continue to serve as reminder that we are standing on the edge of a precipice. Technological advances, glorious structures, or excellent systems will be useless in a collapsing world. Libraries will be hit just as hard by the changes and crises affecting the planet and its inhabitants as any other institution and any other collective body or human group.

Since libraries are part of a local, regional and global society, and therefore are traversed by all their problems, breakups and setbacks, they should put aside any kind of “neutrality” discourse, assess the situation they and the community they serve are going (or can go) through, weigh the role they can play (especially considering the huge value of library collections and services) and their responsibility, then take sides and act.

While the (in)formative role of libraries — the one played “by default” — is essential for the development of activist movements and for raising community awareness, libraries should not be merely passive providers of data, physical spaces or technological means.

A first step toward library activism should be to stop waiting for inquiries behind the reference desk, and to provide valuable and up-to-date information even outside their walls. Libraries can distribute annotated bibliographies or share freely accessible resources about the impossibility of infinite growth in a finite world, biophysical limits, climatic change, entropy, peak everything, urban agriculture, recycling or consumption reduction — among many other important and possible topics — on their websites and social networks as well as within their physical spaces. Placing this information at a visible location (virtual or real), and keeping those contents updated and active, clearly indicates a position and a commitment.

Beyond their shelves, libraries can be a source of selected, high-quality information for educational institutions of different levels, social and cultural organizations, neighborhood associations, etc. From urban gardening collectives to groups of local artists, county or town governments, religious associations or naturalist squads, all can benefit from readings and audiovisual documents related to sustainability (and unsustainability), the significance of the Anthropocene, actions that can lead to degrowth.

Going a step further, the library might consider abandoning those behaviors that have brought humanity this far. In particular, they should consider their consumption patterns. As Madorrán Ayerra (2013) points out:

In our capitalistic system, not only are we not more free being able to chose what we consume, but neither are we aware that our desire is

stimulated to induce us to consume, that desires presented as “needs” when they are really “wants”. Besides stimulating it, capitalism turns materialistic desire insatiable, meaning that consumers are never satisfied, they always want more — which has harmful environmental, social and economic consequences — for global consumption is essential to the system’s survival. But we certainly must think of consumption not only as a means of reproducing economic paradigms, but also ideological. Consumption and oversupply produce part of the conformism with the system, the feeling that all that is needed is to continue consuming.

Libraries should critically assess the use and diffusion of particular technologies and the support they give them. They should also consider the management of their resources (water, electricity, plastics, paper) and their waste production (especially those that may be polluting). As mentioned above, degrowth is no longer an option: the option is how to reach it.

Moving some more steps forward, libraries might assume what Löwy (2002, 2004) calls an “ecosocialist ethic”: social, equal, supportive, democratic, radical and responsible. In other words, libraries might take positions “without any concession to contemplative or overly optimistic visions regarding increasingly serious ecological crises” (Aranda Sánchez, 2014).

They can work toward envisioning new possibilities against hopelessness, resignation, toward exploring alternatives to the current capitalist, consumerist, mercantilist, extractive, aggressive, exploitative panorama. They can foster cultural anti-capitalism and build connections between tradition and a new generation of creators and artists. Moreover, libraries do not have to limit themselves to the cultural sphere. They can actively support some of the points²⁷ that Harvey (2014) presents as characteristic of anti-capitalism (see Pérez, 2014). For there is no “green” capitalism reconciled with nature in the short or long term; capitalism is inherently expansive.

Neither is perpetual growth nor constant expansion possible, as capitalism advocates suggest. A “steady-state” economy needs to be encouraged — one where people seek to have enough instead of always craving for more. A sort of modernized “subsistence economy” which might be able to achieve a balance between human and the planet’s well-being, and the available resources. It is also necessary to defend *commons* and common good, public and collective interests, and community life, against appropriation, competition and accumulation.

Libraries can work for the de-commodification and democratization of all possible goods, starting with one as strategic as knowledge. In order to go about tackling degrowth and a paradigm shift, it is necessary to suggest and socialize alternatives to the market, individual and global competition, profit-based models, etc. Libraries might lead by example and put the notions of eco-

efficiency, biomimicry — the one seeking to build human systems by imitating natural ones — and deglobalization, into practice.

The idea behind the phrase “think globally, act locally” has been a driving force of the western modern environmental movement since it was put on the map some four decades ago. By assuming an activist and militant role, libraries can use their structures, collections and know-how to bring about changes in their communities — no matter how small these changes and these communities may be. Eventually, they can join forces with other libraries and many other social actors to try to force changes at the national level, and beyond. But it is probably at the local level where the results can be better attained. Being, as they are, institutions seen as a model of resource sharing, cooperation, and community responsiveness, they can use their advantageous position to launch certain messages, showing themselves as a clear, committed example of collaborative problem-solving. An example that should be highlighted, explained, documented and publicized, so that it can be repeated and replicated. And above all, it must be thought and rethought. For, as Spanish philosopher Manuel Sacristán (1996) pointed out, every decent thought must always be in crisis.

Conclusion

Respect existence or expect resistance. Anonymous.

Humanity is entering the age of irreversibility: desertification, melting of the poles and changes in the behavior of certain living beings²⁸ are the most visible examples of human-induced processes — processes for which there is no going back. Shiva (2005) states:

We share this planet, our home, with millions of species. Justice and sustainability both demand that we do not use more resources than we need. Restraint in resource use and living within nature’s limits are preconditions for life and social justice.

However, few, if any, real sustainability policies have been envisaged so far, let alone degrowth ones. Instead of applying the brakes and reversing unsustainability, *business as usual* continues with merely a few institutional changes designed not to meet environmental and social demands but to accommodate the requirements of big companies and financial institutions. An escape forward strategy to guarantee economic growth and financial stability, and to protect both against criticism from civil society by using legal and administrative tools to hinder and punish social protest and civil disobedience on the one hand, and on the other, by encouraging wishful thinking and a dangerous

illusion of control that, from cinema to newspapers, seek to anesthetize people with the idea that, sometime in the future, technology will solve everything. A dual strategy flavored with a verbal paraphernalia (declarations, open letters, lists of objectives and international goals) that do not change reality in the slightest, but, apparently, eases consciences.

All this verbiage falls onto fertile ground: a vast majority of the population is not interested in hearing certain truths. For, as Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan points out, “the capacity of human beings to ignore what they do not want to know is unlimited” (*El País*, 2013). Ignorance buys tranquility.

The best antidote in countering collective self-deception is neither skepticism nor denial or despair, but working to raise awareness and advocating for action. And for all types of measures designed to change our production model, reduce consumption, degrow, manage available resources responsibly. For libraries, it is time to go beyond declarations and speeches and to become a trench, a space of resistance and reflection, thought and putting that thought into practice.

Libraries should also establish caring and trusting relationships with their community and foster selfless actions, so as being able to say “it won’t be for want of trying on our part, we helped as much as we could”, as Spanish poet Antonio Orihuela puts it in one of his latest books (2011), quoting a story that, to some extent, leaves the doors open to hope.

An old man was walking along a beach in Mexico after an uncommon spring storm. The beach was full of dying fish thrown ashore by the waves, and the man was throwing them back to the sea one by one. A tourist saw him, approached him and asked, “What are you doing?” “I try to help these fish”, the old man said. “But there are thousands of them on these beaches; throwing a few back to the sea is useless”, complained the tourist. “It is helpful to this one”, replied the old man, as he threw one fish back to the ocean.

NOTES

- 1 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Stockholm, June 5-16, 1972. See UNESCO (1973).
- 2 IFLA had made public a similar declaration more than a decade before, though it had not the same spread. See IFLA (2002).
- 3 According to data provided by PRB (2016) for August 2016.
- 4 It is curious to realize that nowadays “nature” is to be understood as just the environment and those non-human living beings inhabiting it; human beings remain out of the picture. Apparently, humans have nothing to do with natural laws; in fact, human problems are in general addressed separately. The mental division between

the “natural world” and the “social world” (and everything surrounding the creation and maintenance of such a fracture) probably played an important role in sustaining the human’s exploitation of the planet, at least from an intellectual/ideological point of view.

- 5 For an alternative to the dominant account provided by the World Bank and IMF on “poverty reduction” at a global level, see e.g. Kirk (2015). According to some statistics, 59% of the current population live below the poverty line. See also UNDP (2016). For a detailed analysis, see Odekon (2015).
- 6 For several Algonquin peoples (Ojibwa, Saulteaux, Cree, Naskapi, Innu) from Canada and the United States, the *wendigo*, *windigo* or *witiko* is a supernatural entity. Possessed by immense greed and a voracious hunger, it goes as far as to engage in cannibalism and other excesses to satisfy its instincts. Nowadays, indigenous peoples have established parallels between environmental destruction and the greedy behavior of the *wendigo* — or the people possessed by the spirit.
- 7 “Economists and politicians, on their part, fall in the same practice of self-deception, looking for a kind of reasoning that is more attractive than realistic. For instance, they speak of restarting growth, despite the fact that this economic crisis will never end; of accepting sacrifices now in order to obtain a future prosperity when, in reality, each adjustment is leading us to the catabolic collapse; of plans of rescue necessary to restart the economy, when in reality these are only useful to plug the holes of big banks; or of policies favoring employment which in reality are the degradation of the conditions of workers, etc. And the fact is that, again, our leaders look for a heroic narrative in which, thanks to their determination and their statesmanship, they will be able to return to the earlier situation, that is to a state of endless growth [...] The problem with the heroic narrative is not just that it is wrong; it is that it is leading us to disaster” (Turiel, 2011).
- 8 In 1972, the first of the reports of the so-called “Club of Rome” was published. Titled *The Limits to Growth*, it was commissioned to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, and coordinated by Donella H. Meadows. Authors used a computer simulation model to track the interactions of five variables (world population, industrialization, pollution, food production and resource depletion) under three scenarios. Two of the scenarios resulted in total collapse. Despite criticism, the report put on the international agenda the idea that growth cannot be infinite on a planet with finite resource supplies.
- 9 See United Nations (2005).
- 10 See IGBP (2015).
- 11 The term “Anthropocene” was introduced in the scientific field in 2000 by Dutch chemist Paul J. Crutzen (along with Eugene Stoermer), winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize in his specialty for his contributions to ozone’s chemistry in Earth’s atmosphere. See Crutzen & Stoermer (2000). See also Steffen et al. (2011), the analysis in Fernández Durán (2011), the considerations in Hamilton (2015), Zalasiewicz et al. (2014), Ruiz de Elvira (2015) and Waters *et al.* (2016), and the texts by Scranton (2013, 2015).

- 12 In the same line expresses Hansen (2013) when he points out that: “The Anthropocene encourages thinking beyond the autonomous self, but it tends to promote high-modernist schemes to improve climatic conditions [...] the Anthropocene would be better understood as yet another alternative modernity, a deeply ambivalent assertion of human sovereignty at this particular postcolonial moment”.
- 13 See Worldwatch Institute (2013).
- 14 See United Nations (1982).
- 15 *Earth Charter Initiative*. [Online]. <http://earthcharter.org/>
- 16 See United Nations (2015).
- 17 See Alves (2009) for an approach to green spin and greenwashing; Smith (1998) for an analysis of green consumerism and green marketing; Cottle (2015) for green jobs and green economy; Christoph (2014) for a study on Green New Deal; and a review of all this terminology in Wehr (2011).
- 18 “Only people who set themselves limits can acknowledge the existence of others and, ultimately, accept them in their midst; and that hospitality towards strangers is perhaps the only grounds for envisioning any possibility of civilizing social relations on this beleaguered planet” (Riechmann, 2004).
- 19 “Sufficiency principles (as opposed to mere efficiency) such as those of restraint, respite, precaution, have the virtue of partially resurrecting well-established notions like moderation and thrift, ideas that have never completely disappeared, and will indeed be in need as guides to action in a less unsustainable and more resilient economy” (Barry, 2012).
“Sufficiency... as a social organising principle that builds upon established notions such as restraint and moderation to provide rules for guiding collective behaviour” (Sorrell, 2010).
- 20 “It will be very difficult to define sufficiency and build the concept [of sufficiency] into economic theory and practice. But I think it will prove far more difficult to continue to operate [as if] there is no such thing as enough” (Daly, 1993).
- 21 See Schlosberg (2001, 2007), and Dobson & Valencia Sáiz (2005).
- 22 See Asara et al. (2015).
- 23 See Schneider, Kallis & Martinez-Alier (2010).
- 24 One example is the movement known as “minimalism”, supported by such characters as James Wallman (author of *Stuffocation*), Leo Babaura (*The Power of Less*) or Marie Kondo (*The Magic of Order*).
- 25 The French version of Georgescu-Roegen’s book, translated by Jacques Grinevald in 1979 (*La décroissance: entropie-écologie-économie*) introduced the term “degrowth” in its title, for in 1975 the Romanian author had already recommended, in an article, that growth should not be just halted, but reversed.
- 26 The conference of 2014 was opened with the intervention of Naomi Klein, who had just published *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*. See Germanos (2014).
- 27 E.g. to displace the opposition between private property and state power as far as possible by common rights regimes – with particular emphasis upon human

knowledge and the land as the most crucial commons we have (#3); to slow down daily life to maximise time for free activities conducted in a stable and well-maintained environment protected from dramatic episodes of creative destruction (#6); or to support the greatest possible diversification in ways of living and being, of social relations and relations to nature, and of cultural habits and beliefs within territorial associations, communes and collectives (#11). The technology-related points, however, may be strongly challenged.

28 See Scheffers et al. (2016).

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