

Degrowth is coming

By Edgardo Civalero

Usāpuyew, usu wapiw [Going backward, looking forward]
Swampy Cree traditional saying

The planet's biophysical limits exist, manifest in its ability to supply resources to and absorb wastes from human activity. This way, exponential growth within finite limits result in overshooting the biosphere capacity to sustain our activities, and places humanity on a collision course with biophysical reality.

Generally speaking, throughout the history of humankind, human beings have been aware of those boundaries and of the pressing need to protect the existing resources: their lives depended and still depend on them. And not only their lives, but also the lives of their travel companions, with whom they are closely linked through an intricate network of relationships among all members of any natural systems. After all, the world is a fabric where all threads are equally important: if one of them comes apart or disappears, the rest will not fail to follow it.

However, from a certain moment in human history, societies with capitalist market economies began to view themselves as independent of that abstract entity known as "nature", and believed that human beings could handle their environment at their convenience using and abusing it to their advantage and for their own benefit. Advances in scientific knowledge fed the idea of humanity as a superior and unique species, lord and master of everything around it. Few realized that man is not the weaver but another thread of the tapestry.

Industrial revolution and the boom of capitalist market economies —which required massive amounts of all kind of natural resources to fuel the goods production chain that greases the wheels of the market—, bolster the use and abuse. The entire planet was explored, mapped, colonized, assessed for its potential economic interest and exploited. Few times limits were respected, few values or ethical principles were taken into account, one after another were disregarded in the name of progress and development.

Environmental problems began to be openly addressed in the second half of the past century, with *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson, 1962) as one of the seminal writings on the

issue. Research and studies carried out in different places by different people began to underpin the idea that human societies were degrading, destabilizing, disrupting and depleting natural systems. New terms made their way into the mainstream, such as "conservation(ism)", "preservation(ism)", "ecology", "environmentalism", and shortly afterwards, "green economy" and "sustainability". The latter drew attention on the urgent need to preserve existing resources and reduce waste, however, the main approach for sustainable development revolved around preventing the economic system failure while allowing for the green-washing of business as usual policies. Few voices called for the need to address the causes of the socio-ecological crisis, and the proposed solutions were stopgap responses aimed at mitigating the effects or reducing the impact.

The measures adopted were largely inappropriate from the outset and proved to be ineffective: rather than stopping or reversing the trend, they had the seemingly paradoxical effect of accelerating it. In fact, the "Great Acceleration" in human activity from the start of the Industrial revolution to present day backs the claim that Earth has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. In response to this, two different approaches have now arisen. On the one hand, minimalism: learning to live a simpler life, to live with less. On the other, sufficiency and degrowth (of industrialised countries): downsize of production and consumption, and therefore reducing the use of natural resources and energy, while reusing, recovering and recycling as much as possible and meeting the needs of the long-term viability of the earth's biophysical systems that support human societies and in which economies are embedded.

Kallis defines degrowth as "an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions."

The degrowth movement has become a trend of thought and practice: the spearhead not only for a life worthy of being lived, but for humanity's survival in the face of overshooting of planetary boundaries. Authors and researchers such as Serge Latouche, Giorgos Kallis or Federico Demaria are among its proponents.

If libraries seek to collaborate with communities in the fight against climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, natural resources depletion, biotic impoverishment, the ongoing mass extinction of species —and their social outputs—, to name a few strands of the current socio-ecological crisis, they should actively contribute to the degrowth debate and support it. And they should do so twice over. On the one hand, by degrowing themselves, namely reducing their energy consumption, revising their

practices and policies accordingly, analyzing what markets are they supporting with their purchases... And on the other hand, by helping their communities make the (urgent) degrowth transition possible, which, among many other possibilities, means providing information, creating spaces for collaborative learning and working and fostering the necessary debate on the challenges ahead.

The problems confronting the planet's inhabitants —all living creatures, human and non-human— are beyond dispute: they are all too obvious to try to conceal or mask them, let alone to deny them. There is no space in this column to provide an elementary bibliography that reflects the seriousness and complexity of the current socio-environmental crisis. Libraries are not foreign to it and will end up suffering from its effects as much as the rest of the world. Fortunately, they have the tools and skills to contribute their efforts in the transition process towards sustainable societies within finite planetary boundaries.

The author

Edgardo Civallero has a degree in Library and Information Sciences. He has specialized in library services for indigenous peoples and minority groups, oral tradition, endangered sounds (languages and music), and knowledge classification. He is a researcher as well, on issues related to libraries and decolonization, libraries and degrowth/sustainability, critical/social/progressive librarianship, open access and non-European history of the book. He is a member of IFLA's Standing Committee of the Indigenous Matters Section and a member of the coordinating committee of Progressive Librarians Guild. He currently works as an independent librarian, information consultant, writer and editor.