

Libraries and degrowth

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When we contemplate these changes and these threats [to the Earth], we tend to revert to certain ways of speaking [...] We talk about parts per million of carbon and we talk about our responsibilities to future generations. This kind of talk is easy; it is expected. But I have come to believe that it is largely useless, and not just because nobody is really listening. It is useless because it does not get anywhere near the heart of the matter.

Paul Kingsnorth, 2017.

In August, 1984, British environmentalist Norman Myers finished the epilogue of *Gaia: An Atlas of Planet Management*. There he stated:

I've discovered that I do not know much about this planet — and I am not the only one. Scientists do not agree on the existing vegetation on Earth [...] They know even less about our wild habitats, of which we demand more and more. We are extinguishing species that we do not know yet.

After writing a book where most of the environmental problems facing the planet at that time were addressed, and a number of the forthcoming ones were predicted, Myers was just acknowledging, in the final lines of his work, how much was still unknown about the biosphere —the ensemble of natural systems in where we live and to which we belong— and the devastating effects of human activities on it.

More than three decades later, in the middle of a social and environmental crisis worse than foreseen by Myers, it is another British environmentalist, Paul Kingsnorth, who goes one step further to point out that we are also failing to take responsibility for

what we already know — we are fatally tangled in fruitless debates that lead us away from the real causes of that crisis.

1. Trespassing all limits

It seems that there is something about us, our intelligence, which entails that we're capable of acting in ways that are rational within a narrow framework but are irrational in terms of other long-term goals, like... do we care what kind of a world our grandchildren will live in?

Noam Chomsky, 2010.

At least since 1972 —when the first report to the Club of Rome, titled *The Limits to Growth*, was published—, we know 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).

The planet's biophysical limits have to do with its ability to supply resources to and absorb wastes from all its inhabitants — including humankind. In general terms and for the most part of history, human beings have always been aware of those boundaries and of the need to protect the existing, available resources: their lives depended and still depend on them. However, at some point in their history, some societies began to view themselves as independent from nature, and acted as if they could make use of the environment according to their whim or convenience, (ab)using it for their own purpose and gain. Few realized that man is not the weaver but another thread of the tapestry.

Industrial revolution and the boom of capitalist market economies spurred the planet's plunder. The exponential growth of human population and activities —meaning an exponential increase in energy and resource consumption on the one hand, and in waste production, on the other— exceeded Earth's carrying capacity by 1.5 times, overshooting its ability to regenerate resources and absorb the by-products of human productivity —i.e. to sustain continuous population and economic growth— and placing humankind and all its biosphere's travel companions in a critical situation.

Coates and Leahy (2006) explained:

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 [...] 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 [...].

Later, in 2008, Cairns summarized:

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.

Human activity has altered the planet's biophysical systems to such an extent as to leave an inedible mark on its geology, what has prompted the scientific community—starting with Crutzen and Stoermer in 2000—to suggest that we might be entering a new epoch, the Anthropocene:

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 Anthropocene. 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 (González, Montes and Santos, 2008).

In 2011 a group of seventeen Nobel laureates released a memorandum supporting that reasoning, and sounding the alarm bells:

We face the evidence that our progress as the dominant species has come at a very high price. Unsustainable patterns of production, consumption, and

population growth are challenging the resilience of the planet to support human activity [...] Science indicates that we are transgressing planetary boundaries that have kept civilization safe for the past 10,000 years. Evidence is growing that human pressures are starting to overwhelm the Earth's buffering capacity. Humans are now the most significant driver of global change, propelling the planet into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene [...] We cannot continue on our current path. The time for procrastination is over (RSAS, 2011).

Closely related to the former is the notion of Great Acceleration: the idea that "any human activities reached take-off points sometime in the twentieth century and have accelerated sharply towards the end of the century" (Steffen *et al.*, 2004). According to those authors, "the last 50 years have without doubt seen the most rapid transformation of the human relationship with the natural world in the history of humankind".

Zalasiewicz *et al.* (2012) add that "although there has been much debate around the proposed start date for the Anthropocene, the beginning of the Great Acceleration has been a leading candidate".

2. Fruitless struggles

Sustainable development is a half-vast approach to vast problems. Its purpose, to make life on this planet sustainable, is a noble disguise for the maintenance of the status quo.

Medard Gabel, 2015.

Following in the tradition of former authors and drawing from diverse sources, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is considered by many one of the seminal events in modern environmentalism. There she stressed the idea that human societies were degrading, destabilizing, disrupting and depleting natural systems. Since then, new terms found their way into public consciousness and mainstream media, such as "conservation(ism)", "preservation(ism)", "ecology", "environmentalism", and shortly afterwards, "green economy" and "sustainability".

Soon afterwards, Kenneth E. Boulding's article *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth* (published in 1966 in a volume of works titled *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy*), also became a landmark paper. Led by groups such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth, environmentalism gained momentum in the 1970s. Earth Day was established in 1970, and the same year Lewis Mumford's second volume of *The Myth of the Machine* came out; two years later the first United Nations conference on the environment was held in Stockholm, and the term "sustainability" was included in the first report to the Club of Rome; closing the decade, in 1979 James Lovelock published *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*.

In 1980 "sustainable development" was identified as one of the "global priorities" in a report by the IUCN; in 1987, United Nations WCED put to press *Our Common Future*, also known as the "Brundtland Report", including the most widespread definition of sustainable development; and in 1990, Barry Commoner presented *Making Peace with the Planet*. Two years later, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development issued the *Earth Charter* and the *Agenda21*. Finally, in 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

However, despite all the voices, documents, efforts, plans and good intentions succinctly summarized (and therefore simplified) in the previous paragraphs, little has changed, and the business as usual scenario does not bode at all well; actually, the environmental situation is getting worse, not better. According to the preliminary results of the *Millenium Ecosystem Assessment* (United Nations, 2005), the capacity of the world's major ecosystems to provide resources and services essential to sustain life is in decline. Together with climate change and the increase in world population and pollution levels, this poses one of the greatest threats to global ecological stability ever known to humanity. A threat we have to face in addition to several global ecological issues, such as biological diversity loss or habitat destruction.

3. Sustainability and green myths

We live today in an age of *sustainababble*, a cacophonous profusion of uses of the word *sustainable* to mean anything from environmentally better to cool.

Robert Engelman, 2013.

After years of unbridled capitalism and technology worship —which have seen the commodification and marketing of nature and social life—, there is little doubt about the deadly combination of both that is leading us to the brink of environmental and social destruction.

The ideas, measures and proposals developed so far to tackle the huge socio-ecological issues overwhelming us, have had an insignificant impact and have failed to serve the purpose for which they were intended, probably because few of them have addressed their causes; the proposed technical solutions have been aimed at mitigating their worst effects or reducing their impact. Probably the most popular among them were "sustainability" and all those "green" initiatives, especially "green capitalism", "green growth" and "green economy".

The notion of "sustainability" —and its derivative, "sustainable development"— drew attention on the urgent need to preserve existing resources and reduce waste. It assumed that new markets and new technologies could simultaneously push forward economic growth and protect natural systems. Hence, its main approach revolved around the possibility of having infinite accumulation and growth in a finite world, without dramatically damaging the environment — which happens to be an impossible goal.

"Green economy" and "green growth" sustained the same illusion — that capitalist economies can continue to expand by switching from industrial development moved by fossil fuel and resource extraction to renewable energies, organic farming and pollution control (see United Nations EP, 2011).

Both "sustainable development" and "green growth/economy" have received much criticism over the last decade or so. According to Latouche (2009), they are nothing but oxymora. Kallis (s.f.) states that they depoliticize environmentalism while keeping alive a detrimental, useless debate "about how to best manage the environment without harming the economy or changing the current political order". In the same vein, Le Guin claims that by preventing the economic system failure while allowing for the green-washing of *business as usual* policies, both notions perpetuate "a one-way future consisting only of growth".

To question these approaches to the socio-ecological crises and the lack of progress in pointing out and shaping some of the great transformations needed, two different proposals are now being discussed. On the one hand, minimalism: learning to live a

simpler life, to live with less. On the other, degrowth: downsizing of production and consumption in industrialized countries, and therefore reducing the use of natural resources and energy, while reusing, recovering and recycling as much as possible and securing the long-term viability of the Earth's biophysical systems that support human societies and in which economies are embedded.

4. Degrowth

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, 2013.

Capitalist economies are designed to grow in order not to collapse. "As an incredibly dynamic system, capital cannot abide limits on its development. It converts those limits into barriers, which it transcends and circumvents", explained David Harvey in an interview (2010).

Continued growth has put industrial societies in the path of crossing environmental limits, triggering feedbacks to the climate system and approaching tipping points in Earth's system. A path that will make life harder for everybody, but especially for the most vulnerable, and is drastically reducing our possibilities for living a good life without further depleting natural resources and destroying our environment. We should not go down this path any longer.

Degrowth can be defined as "an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions" (Schneider, Kallis and Martínez Alier, 2010). The Swampy Cree or Maškēkowak, an indigenous people native to northern Manitoba, in Canada, put it in a more graphic, poetic way: *Usāpuyew, usuwapiw* — "going backward, looking forward" (Norman, 1976).

Among the most influential contributions to the debate on the limits to growth and degrowth stands out the works by Romanian ecological economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, which includes *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (1971)

and *Energy and Economic Myths: Institutional and Analytical Economic Essays* (1976). The term "degrowth" first appeared in Jacques Grinevald's French version of the first of these books, *La décroissance: entropie-écologie-économie* (1979).

In 1972, Edward Goldsmith and Robert Prescott-Allen (editors of *The Ecologist*) published *A Blueprint for Survival*, calling for a rapid de-industrialization to avoid the destruction of natural systems. In *Small is Beautiful* (1973) E. F. Schumacher qualified a way of life based on capitalist growth and consumption as absurd. By the year 2000, degrowth already defined a current of socio-political thought and action, and the first international conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity took place in Paris in 2008. French economics professor Serge Latouche (author of *Farewell to Growth*) is currently one of the movement's leading intellectuals, along with Giorgos Kallis and Federico Demaria.

Degrowth suggests that climate catastrophe, ecosystem destruction and resource depletion cannot be challenged with technological improvements, neither with individuals' personal choices such as double-sided printing, spending less time in the shower, reusing cloths and furniture or recycling, however necessary these human behavioural changes may be: the scale of economy must change as well (Jackson, 2009). Besides a critique, degrowth is a new political project. It aims at a cultural change and proposes different transition processes towards societies able to live within their ecological limits, localized economies and new forms of egalitarian resource distribution through revised, re-designed democratic institutions. It recommends changing the modern society's collective imagination, displacing material accumulation and efficiency from the central position they hold and replacing them with sufficiency, simplicity, hospitality and sharing (Kallis, s.f.). And it encourages re-thinking and re-evaluating the organization of human societies, and incorporating concepts like "limits", "care", "reproduction" and "dépense" (D'Alisa, Demaría and Kallis, 2014).

As Le Guin (1989) puts it, nobody is "proposing a return to the Stone Age". Degrowth does not mean economic recession or depression (which would have devastating social implications), but an intentional, planned "prosperous way down" through a number of social, economical and biological/environmental steps (including policies and institutions) designed to guarantee that, while production and consumption decrease, human welfare improves and is best distributed (Odum and Odum, 2001).

In short, degrowth does not look for alternatives for a sustainable growth, but for alternatives to capitalism, and to growth as the only drive for progress. According to Slavoj Žižek (2011), it is a radical project: one that "challenges and aims to change the very ideological coordinates of our society".

5. The role of libraries

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

Ferrán Puig Vilar, 2015.

"Curriculum" could be replaced with "library", and Puig Vilar's quotation would continue to serve as a reminder that humanity is standing on the edge of a precipice. And libraries as well.

Both IFLA (2002) and ALA (2015), among many others international LIS-related associations and organizations, have adopted resolutions on sustainability and libraries. But declarations and manifestos are far from actual transformations on the ground.

If libraries intend to join forces 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 just a few core issues of the current socio-ecological crises, they should put aside any kind of "neutrality" discourse, assess the situation they and the communities they serve are faced with, weigh the role they can play (especially considering the long-term value of library collections and services to users and the transformative nature of libraries themselves) and their responsibilities, and actively contribute to and support the degrowth movement/debate.

And they should do so twice over.

On the one hand, by degrowing themselves: revising their consumption patterns, their resources management, their waste production and their practices and policies, as well as analyzing what markets and ideas they are supporting with their purchases, services and activities... On the other hand, by helping their communities make the degrowth

transition possible; among many other possibilities, this means providing information, creating spaces for collaborative learning and working, and fostering the necessary debate on the challenges ahead.

Libraries can help build on the understanding of the impossibility of infinite growth in a finite world, biophysical limits, climatic change, entropy, peak everything, urban agriculture, recycling, consumption reduction, sustainability (and unsustainability), the significance of the Anthropocene, and the critical consciousness and praxis that can lead to degrowth. They can help bridge the gap in knowledge about some of the most pressing issues of our age by collaborating with educational institutions of different levels, social and cultural organizations, neighborhood associations, etc. They can work toward exploring alternatives to the current capitalist, consumerist, mercantilist, extractive, repressive, exploitative panorama.

Libraries can work for the de-commodification and democratization of all possible vital goods, starting with one as strategic as knowledge. They can suggest and socialize alternatives to the market economy, the individual and global competition, the profit-driven models... They might put into practice notions such as eco-efficiency, biomimicry and deglobalization.

By assuming a more active role, libraries can use their structures, collections and know-how to bring about changes in their communities. They can become part of what Carlsson (2008) called *nowtopias*: collaborative, non-capitalist, equal, supportive, democratic, radical and responsible spaces and human networks supporting resilience and participating in the construction of a new social structure.

The problems faced by Earth's inhabitants —all living creatures, human and non-human— are beyond dispute: they are too obvious to try to conceal or mask them, let alone to deny them. Libraries are not foreign to them: they will end up suffering from their effects as much as the rest of the world. Fortunately, they have the tools and skills to contribute their efforts to the transition process towards sustainable post-fossil societies within finite planetary boundaries.

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