On degrowth

— Part I —

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This text was published on Medium

Their choice

On degrowth (01)

In the documentary "The true cost" (2015), Andrew Morgan, the director, explores the current fast fashion movement —an updated, enhanced and truly unhealthy version of capitalist consumerism applied to fashion— and the cost that such unbridled consumption of clothes and accessories is having on the planet and its inhabitants.

The images that make up the film speak for themselves: girls with serious problems of shopaholism (oniomania or compulsive buying disorder) and "referent" bloggers in the fashion world showing their massive purchases on YouTube, and crowds desperately rushing into a store during a Black Friday (the inauguration of the Christmas season), juxtaposed with anonymous textile workers at work in Dongguan, China (where one out of every six dresses worn in the U.S. is produced), or chrome-laden spills —a substance used to tan the leather used for shoes and handbags— into the water of Khanpur, India.

In addition to these powerful images, the documentary includes numerous interviews and testimonies that are no less powerful. The starting point is as simple as it is dramatic: as John Hilary, of the British organization War on Want, explains, the big U.S. clothing multinationals are encouraging the brutal and indiscriminate consumption of their products. To this end, they have created what has come to be known as *fast fashion*: fashion that changes practically every week and means that there are now 52 seasons a year, instead of the usual four organized by season. To give the average

consumer something to buy without going broke, they offer them clothes on the cheap. And to obtain those items, companies are "globalizing production," a euphemism for outsourcing up to 97% of their manufacturing to poor countries where wages are derisory, safety legislation is non-existent and workers' rights, if any, are largely ignored. In those countries there is still mistreatment and abuse, there is still more or less disguised slavery of the workers, there is still pollution and waste. We get cotton shirts for four dollars or real leather shoes for ten dollars.

The mechanism of action of these multinational companies (and of their food and technology peers, which are outside the scope of the documentary) is also very simple: they place themselves in the markets of "developing" countries, contact local entrepreneurs and establish a maximum purchase price for a given type of product (belts, slippers, underwear), warning that they will go wherever they are offered lower prices. Internal competition begins among such entrepreneurs, who gradually lower their prices to win the contract… until they reach ridiculous levels. Arif Jebtik, one of them, comments:

> That's the way it is. They are competing there [in the West], the [multinational] stores are competing, When the stores come and contact us to place and negotiate orders, they tell us, "Look, this particular store is selling this shirt for $5, so I need to sell it for $4, so you better lower your prices," and we lower our prices. Then the other store comes in and says, "Hey, if they're selling it for $4, I need to sell it for $3; if you can do it, we have a deal, and if not, we'll go

> somewhere else." Since we desperately need to do business and we have no other choice, we have to accept.

Since, as they themselves express, raw materials have not become cheaper, but quite the contrary, they cut costs in infrastructure and salaries, and at the same time multiply the working hours and the number of workers in a particular space. Needless to say, to maintain these rates under these conditions, they need desperate employees, willing to put up with everything and, above all, not to complain. Garment factories in India, China, Cambodia or Bangladesh thus become true "slave factories". Factories that we Westerners are unaware of or ignore until a building like the Rana Plaza collapses (Dhaka, Bangladesh, April 13, 2013) and more than a thousand workers die trapped in the rubble… hours after the workers themselves pointed out the danger and were forced to return to their tasks. Those workers have no right to say anything, they have no right to complain. They have no rights. So says Shima Akhter, a worker in the city of Dhaka itself:

> I formed a union at my work. I was the president of the union from its inception. We sent a list of demands and the employers received it. After receiving it, [the workers] had an altercation with them. After the altercation, they closed the doors and 30 or 40 of their men attacked us and beat us up. They used chairs, sticks, ladders and things like scissors to beat us. They mainly punched and kicked us and smashed our heads against the walls. They hit us mostly in the chest and abdomen.

Evidently, capitalism is not going to let a few deaths, a few abuses and even the suffering of entire countries curtail its ability to make money and profit from everything. And this is how we start to find explanations that try to "justify" —if such a thing is even possible— all the atrocities, all the abuses and all the problems that the system causes in the weakest links of the chain… Benjamin Powell, director of the very neoliberal Free Market Institute, becomes a clear example of this type of "didactic illustration" with clarifications such as those that follow:

> Well…those sweatshops are not the last or the worst option that those workers have. Part of the process that raises living standards and leads to higher wages and better working conditions in the long run, which are the causes of development, is physical capital, technology and human capital. When companies go to those countries, they bring those three elements to those workers, so they start the process [of development].
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> […] We have to bear in mind that the alternatives available to these people are not our alternatives, they are much worse, and they are generally much worse than sweatshop labor….

According to Powell, then, it is not a matter of exploitation of impoverished countries by economic powers and their business conglomerates seeking profit at any price; the discourse is turned around (as it is always done with any kind of abuse or exploitation) and it is established that the companies are actually doing a huge favor to those countries, sowing in them the seeds of growth and evolution, of improved living

conditions and industrialization. Kate Ball-Young, a former sourcing manager at Joe Fresh, adds impassively:

> Does it bother me that there are people working in a factory, making clothes for Americans, or for Europeans, and they spend their whole lives like that? No. I mean… they're doing their job! They could be doing a lot of much worse things. There's nothing inherently dangerous about sewing clothes … so we're starting [in those countries] with a relatively safe industry, not like coal mining, or gas mining…

While turning the tables, the neoliberal discourse is biased; it analyzes only one aspect of the situation (what is being done, i.e. weaving clothes) and leaves out everything else (under what conditions it is done and what it means for all those people, their society, their land… and, of course, what it does not do or does not allow those people to do).

And again Benjamin Powell, this time in a television interview in the United States, under the title "Are sweatshops good?":

> We're talking about places with very poor working conditions compared to the conditions that an American knows, very low wages by American standards, perhaps with children working in places that may not be allowed by local labor laws, but there is one important feature that I want to emphasize … and that is that these are places where people choose to work, [choosing those places] literally out of a bad set of other options.

These are not nations and societies that have become slaves to Western corporations. It's not about neocolonialism, about plain and simple exploitation, about absolute abuse. It is not about getting whatever you want on whatever terms you want. It is not about making things that we consider unacceptable happen in another country so that in our own we can live in a "welfare society" with a guaranteed, envied and enviable happiness. It is not about people who, given the choice between absolute misery and slave labor, "choose" the latter.

Let's not feel guilty, it's nothing like that. Actually, they are choosing, they are making a choice. They decide. And they choose the best.

Yes, it is their choice. Like the miners "choose" to leave their lungs in the coal mine. Like those who fumigate crops with toxic agro-chemicals "decide" to ruin their health and condemn their children to be born with deformities and incurable diseases. Like the girl-prostitutes in countries like Thailand "decide" to let a handful of men do with them as they please. They choose it, they decide. What's more: it could be much worse, so their choice, while it seems bad to us, is not. It seems bad to us because our standards are higher than theirs, poor and wretched as they are, but they are not that bad. What's more: many of them love what they do, they are happy.

That's what they tell us. That's how they sell it to us. And we believe it.

We believe it.

In her essay "Liberalism and the Death of Feminism" (1990), activist Catharine A. MacKinnon wrote: "When material conditions override 99% of your choices, it makes no sense to say that the remaining 1% —what you are doing— is your choice."

Thirty years later, we still don’t get it.

Of libraries, ruralities, and mycelia

On degrowth (02)

When we arrived, a huge pot was steaming under the tin roof of the improvised dining room, where the community *sancocho* was cooked: a kind of stew in which there was potato, *ahuyama*, *arracacha*, chicken, and a list of other ingredients that made me dizzy just from hearing it, and of which I only knew half for sure... I greeted Doña Ana, the cook in charge of the stew, and put my nose close to the vapors exhaled from the battered metal container. That smelled good. It would taste better, the eldersin Old Castile used to say, far away, on the other side of the sea...

...because I was at the foot of the mountains that limit the growth of the city of Bogotá, Colombia to the east. There, in the Cundiboyacense highlands, on the southeastern urban-rural border of that huge city, is located a place known as El Uval.

And on that place, still green with pastures and empty of houses, stands a small library, the only one of its kind: the Biblioteca Popular Agroecológica(Agro-ecological Popular Library) El Uval. Or BAU, as its creators and promoters call it. A self-managed, grassroots, small experience... And interesting, both for its small size —which gives it a certain autonomy— and for its potential capacity to promote small (but significant) changes at the local level, within the community of half-rural urbanites or half-urbanized peasants who populate those margins.

[Margins are fascinating, especially when talking about libraries and related institutions, but also when analyzing the circulation of knowledge in them. For they are areas of mixture, diversity, instability, fluidity, in constant evolution...]

The BAU is moving —for the time being— off the radar and the attention of the mass library currents...

...which, in my opinion, gives it the opportunity to walk "on the margins of the world." And to make decisions and choose paths and horizons that it might not otherwise be able to choose so easily.

But I was talking about a pot of *sancocho*, and about Doña Ana, who never stopped stirring the food, and about an old peasant house in Cundinamarca, with its thick walls and its bamboo and tile roof, and about a library located in one of its rooms. And aboutthe farmland around it, where Don Gustavo, a beekeeper turned organic farmer, is discovering (and sharing with those who want to listen, who are not few) the secrets of the Earth and its rhythms. That is how they are relearning to work a land that has been abandoned by the old sowing and harvesting hands: asking those who still remember and trying to reproduce these techniques on the field.

What comes out of the sum of a library and an experience of organic agriculture (and a thousand other things that come together there, in that little corner of the Bogotá Andean slopes)? Well, the group that supports the BAU is still discovering it. That's what they told me in the conversation we had after enjoying lunch and sitting around

the still-hot embers, in the community kitchen. That answer fascinated me: nowadays, very few dare to confess that they don't know something and that they are on the way to discovering it. Starting by understanding that one is more full of uncertainties than certainties is a good first step. What follows is giving yourself a lot of time to experiment and make mistakes, to forget the established norms... and have your head open enough to allow yourself doubt, failure, rethinking... And, above all, wonder.

I suppose I let myself be infected by the spirit of that group, the cultivated field that surrounded me and the BAU itself, because in one of the many meanderings that our chat had by the side of the dead fire, I found myself recalling an old analogy that I used years ago — a legacy from those times when I wanted to be a biologist: the library as mycelium.

A mycelium is, in my opinion, one of the most fascinating biological structures that populate our planet. It is the vegetative part of any species in the fungal kingdom: a network of whitish filaments called hyphae that generally develop underground. They can reach impressive dimensions: it has been calculated that some cover hundreds of hectares, and there are some biologists who consider them the largest living beings in the world.

On the one hand, the mycelia break down the organic matter of the soil, creating nutrients for the fungi themselves and for the rest of the organisms that surround them. On the other, they form associations called mycorrhizae with the roots of plants and trees, helping them to absorb and assimilate nutrients. Interestingly, extensive

networks of mycelia have been shown to connect a forest below, moving water and nutrients where they are needed, supporting soil structure, processing debris, removing toxics...

It can be said that they form the foundations of a healthy ecosystem. A mesh that makes life truly communal.

At some point, it occurred to me that a library —or a network of them— could work like this. Visible or invisible, that matters little, although sometimes invisibility (as well as smallness) is very useful when it comes to avoiding blows and pressure. I imagined a multiform system of libraries that would unite citizens, groups, organizations and institutions with a delicate web of subtle threads, and fragments of information and knowledge. An ever-adaptable system, always in evolution, because times change and with them, people and their needs. And because information managers need to be united and flexible in order to adapt to the problems that they are going to have to face precisely because of managing information.

[For information is power... with all that it means and represents].

A library (or a set of them) as large and as alive and as useful as a huge mycelium would be an interesting experiment.

Confident that this metaphor —or, at least, a small part of it— would someday become a reality, I walked out of that rural Bogota corner, leaving behind a lot of

beautiful people painting murals, tilling the land, playing with a couple of dogs, rescuing frogs and tadpoles from puddles, and keeping alive the project of a library that can be more than books and reading promotion. A library that includes the information that beats on the Earth and that moves with the clouds, and the one that still travels from mouths to ears, and much, much more...

Because the greatest value of libraries lies in how tremendously adaptablethey can be. But their success depends on us. It depends on us removing stereotypes from our heads and limits from our eyes and hands, and being able to see mycelia where others see closed rooms and ordered shelves.