

IVAN BURAJ

## DEGROWTH – UTOPIA OR REALITY?

**Abstract.** The main goal of the following article is to present and justify the philosophical concept of degrowth as a real alternative to the cult of (unlimited economic) growth, the driving force of which is the pursuit of profit, which devastates the individual and the entire society, and last but not least, nature and the climate. It is also critical of today's generally recognized options for solving the climate crisis, such as the strategy of the so-called sustainable development or green growth, which – as the author shows with several examples – may indeed help to solve it, but they do not consistently solve it. Such a permanent solution must involve a total and radical change in the way of life, which would limit people, but would also be attractive enough for them. Although the focus is on a philosophical analysis of the whole issue, the author considers its historical, sociological and political aspects as well, to avoid excessive generalities and at the same time keep its philosophical breadth and depth.

**Keywords:** growth; degrowth; sustainable development; capitalism; way of life; utopia; reality

1. Introduction. 2. Growth – degrowth. 3. Sustainable development as the only real alternative? 4. Capitalism and degrowth. 5. Degrowth as a radical change in the way of life. 6. Degrowth – just a utopia? 7. Conclusion.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The main goal of the following article is to present and justify the philosophical concept of degrowth as a new, or more precisely, a re-established, radical alternative to solving the current problems associated with the climate crisis and to show that although its consistent application would mean a fundamental change in the way of life, it does not have to be a utopia. Rather, it is a real inevitability, which can bring people more freedom and personal self-realization. In other words, my main hypothesis consists in the assumption that only a fundamental change in people's way of life in the spirit

of the degrowth philosophy can, if not directly solve, then at least mitigate the negative consequences of the climate crisis. Although the focus is on a philosophical analysis of the whole issue, I consider its historical, sociological and political aspects as well, to avoid excessive generalities and at the same time keep its philosophical breadth and depth.

In the preface to the Slovak edition of Michel Bosquet (André Gorz) book *Ecology and Politics, Ecology and Freedom*, its translator Silvia Ruppeldtová noticed that especially in the so-called Eastern bloc against degrowth (and similar truly revolutionary theories), the old cliché that there is no real alternative to economic growth is endlessly repeated (Ruppeldtová, 2022, 7). However, there is always an alternative. And that could be degrowth.

From a philosophical perspective, degrowth means stopping and looking back, or returning back to the valuable, verified, instead of a constant and often senseless, headlong rush forward. Instead of gliding along the surface, moving inward to the depths. Instead of predatory, often meaningless activism, degrowth offers calmness, prudence and restraint. Instead of applying the dictates of unlimited speed even where it really shouldn't have a place (rest or sex), it prefers slowness. Instead of a constant one-sided pragmatic focus on efficiency and expediency, it has a full understanding of creative search, and sometimes ineffective fumbling. Instead of the pursuit of ever-higher productivity and profit, it offers a constantly expanding field for free time and self-realization. Instead of the constant growth of the volume of work and consumption, it prioritizes the free development of each individual. Instead of proposing single, often isolated or incomplete solutions to the ecological and climate crises, it tries to offer a more complex, radical and, according to his supporters, more effective strategy. In a way, this is growth in the spiritual sense of the word – growth for the development of personality, freedom. Degrowth even includes (and now I vividly imagine all the fanatic worshipers of the cult of growth congratulating themselves or at least

significantly raising their eyebrows) doing nothing or simply lazing around, which, however – as history has shown many times – can ultimately lead to fruitful, creative results.

The French philosopher André Gorz was apparently the first to come up with the term degrowth, when in 1972 he spoke in a public debate about the need to maintain balance on Earth by means of the then-unknown and therefore incomprehensible notion of *décroissance*. Around the same time, a group of British scientists published a statement under the banner *Blueprint for Survival* in which they criticized the one-sided focus of contemporary society on industrial economic growth to further preserve life on our planet. In the same year, the similarly well-known Club of Rome published its first report *Limits to Growth*, where it drew attention to the necessity of systemic changes due to the unsustainable use of the (limited) resources of our planet, which is also growing at an unsustainable pace. At the beginning of the 21st century, the French philosopher and economist Serge Latouche followed up on these almost forgotten ideas in his book *Petit traité de la décroissance sereine (A Brief Essay on Peaceful Degrowth)*, (2007). This idea – concept – strategy eventually grew into a political movement. One of the first swallows in this direction was the *Research and Degrown* group created in 2006 in Barcelona. A little later, cities and countries all over the world joined it, which directly called for the need to create an international network of such movements, which would coordinate their activities, and which would provide the entire movement with an organizational umbrella and more efficiency. Russia's invasion of Ukraine united almost the entire world, but it also pushed this activity to the back burner. It also revitalized the military industry as well as large mining companies and their main customers, so that the ambition of Europe and the world to solve or at least slow down the climate crisis through a process of degrowth became more or less secondary. Moreover, it seems to me that some (especially politicians) still have problems accepting degrowth as they had accepting the older term 'gender.'

Although they often don't even know what it means, they know that they don't want it. Along with rejection, the expression 'non-growth' raises further questions. Among them, the most asked question is whether non-growth means the negation of growth, negative growth, recession, a slowdown in growth, or 'zero' growth, that is, neither forward nor backward movement.

## 2. GROWTH – DEGROWTH

If degrowth is not simply the negation of growth, then what is it? More generally, what is the relationship between growth and degrowth?

Until recently, there was an almost unreserved claim that the main goal of the economic policy of the state is to support economic growth.<sup>1</sup> However, this one-sided approach is being slowly reassessed, based on the fact that although economic growth undoubtedly improves some *conditions* in people's lives (healthcare, education, social security, *etc.*), this does not entail that it guarantees a higher standard of living in the true sense of the word, i.e. a better, higher-*quality life* than is normally assumed. It often seems to be the other way around.

Above all, the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP) includes items that definitely do not contribute to the economic or social development of society. Only recently we were able to learn that in Russia, despite the marked decline in the value of the ruble its GDP increased, thanks to the growth of military industrial production and the transportation of military equipment. What is more important from the point of view of the further development of global society, the constant increase in economic growth obviously leads to an increasingly depreciation and plundering of the truly greatest capital, the wealth of society – nature and people, as well

---

1 The pursuit of this goal is not limited to economic policy. For many, endless growth is a natural part of society and man without which their development is unthinkable.

as to a deepening social inequality (especially evident on the global scale) and to other, sometimes hidden, social consequences.

In the pursuit of money and a successful career, traditional social ties – family, friends, colleagues – are falling apart. It is not surprising that the contemporary individual is increasingly haunted by feelings of anxiety, loneliness and life wreckage, as described in detail by Gilles Lipovetsky (2007).

Hence, although people in the West are generally getting wealthier, they are nowhere near more contented and happier. This is also increasingly true among the average poorer population in the so-called developing countries. Research shows that there is a certain relationship between the amount of income and the feeling of happiness. However, the claim that more property brings more happiness applies almost exclusively only at low income levels, in rich countries as well. More in detail, findings show that after reaching a certain threshold of wealth, societies do not become happier, even if their level of wealth continues to grow. This rate of increase in wealth is not necessarily proportional to the increase in feelings of happiness: the latter can stagnate or even decrease. People with higher incomes spend more time at work and less for family or leisure activities. As a result, they are exposed to higher stress. and their irritability, anger and tension increase. Consequently, the number of people suffering from depression grows, which definitely does not lead to an increase in feelings of happiness or satisfaction (Bláhová, 2008). This is also a partial answer to the question that I will deal with later – whether the concept of degrowth can be attractive to different countries and individuals.

The aim of the concept of degrowth is therefore to create a real alternative to the cult of (unlimited economic) growth, the driving force of which is the pursuit of ever higher production, consumption and profit, which devastates and demoralizes the individual and the whole society: the individual becomes essentially a means to this goal (moreover, it is often redundant and then turns into ‘waste’),

while society becomes a means of increasing production and profit. In other words, degrowth is directed against the ‘iron’ logic of growth for growth’s sake, the constant growth of production in all areas of social life and with it the constant increase in energy and material consumption, which exceeds the limits and capabilities of our planet.

For this reason alone, it is undoubtedly important to promote a new understanding of social progress, its goals, content and criteria, in which philosophy has an irreplaceable place. The well-known philosopher, anthropologist and linguist Claude Lévi-Strauss, echoing Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized that the progress of mankind, which is often referred to by supporters of boundless economic growth, is not a one-way, one-dimensional, inevitable and continuous process, but a contradictory process with unexpected knots, twists and turns (Lévi-Strauss, 1999, 29, 354). Moreover, he argued that the history of the world unfolded horizontally rather than vertically or linearly. Individual great civilizations and centers of power existed parallel to each other rather than consecutively. Even today, we would need horizontal and more evenly oriented development rather than vertical growth.

The statement that degrowth is not negative growth, but rather development without one-sided (economic) growth, should also be understood in this context. This is also true of the claim that degrowth is not the negation of progress. Degrowth is, or could be, progress in a sense. However, this would still only represent one aspect, dimension, tendency of non-growth, because progress is by its very nature always one-sidedly oriented (moving in one direction while excluding other possibilities), and as such also one-sidedly assessed and evaluated.

Latouche proposes a more systematic solution: reevaluate all values to give up false values and (re)establish real ones, which is especially urgent in the current situation, such as respect for nature, restraint, solidarity, *etc.* Personally, I am of the opinion that a fundamental and comprehensive solution to the global ecological and climate

crisis<sup>2</sup> requires taking one more step – a radical change in the logic of the system based on growth and with it the promotion of degrowth, if not as the only possible solution, then at least as the most consistent and complex.

In what follows I will argue my solution by comparing it with other alternatives.

### 3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS THE ONLY REAL ALTERNATIVE?

The most common solution is the strategy of the so-called sustainable development, which is also a clear example of how deeply the idea of growth has settled in our heads. So much so that most relevant political and economic entities do not or cannot think about other options. This also explains why the most politically accepted concept of how to solve the climate crisis is the theory and practice of sustainable development, which basically also assumes growth, just in a different, more sustainable and therefore more acceptable form.<sup>3</sup> It is particularly notable that such a concept of sustainability is accepted both by political institutions of global importance, such as the UN or the EU (under the more specific and more characteristic banner of ‘Stability and Growth Pact’), as well as by top businessmen and large multinational companies. This is not a good sign, and it’s not even a coincidence; aside from generic statements about the protection of humanity and the Earth, this concept has a prominent pro-capitalist dimension, as it primarily seeks economic profit. Moreover,

---

2 I systematically prefer the term ‘climate crisis’ to the more frequently used ‘climate change,’ which is often used by deniers of the peculiarity and uniqueness of the current climate situation, claiming that there have been and will be climate changes, so nothing dramatic is actually happening with the climate today.

3 This is also one of the reasons why it is supported by the overwhelming majority of Slovak politicians, who consider sustainable development to be a balanced relationship between environmental protection and further economic growth. At the same time, they probably do not even think about establishing clear borders or criteria of ‘sustainability’ – sustainability against what, against which point or field of reference?

it is generally known that people often subconsciously choose simpler and charming solutions: thus, the appeal of the concept of so-called sustainable development also lies in the fact that it tells us all (but especially the young generation) that it is enough to make ‘cosmetic’ adjustments in the way of life (by saving energy, separate waste collection, planting trees, collecting rainwater, *etc.*) and employ new, ‘green’ technologies to save the entire planet from disaster without having to introduce fundamental changes in our behavior. Lastly, what is most important is that this concept not only does not question the continuous economic growth; it assumes it. Without it, according to its supporters, it is not possible to adequately ensure the realization of the necessary goals in the fight against the climate crisis. The real issue here is actually a new ‘restart’ of growth, which is repeated permanently and cyclically in capitalist economy. For the same reason, degrowth constitutes a counterbalance and opposition to the so-called green growth (or as it is sometimes called, ‘clean economy’) as well, which – as the name suggests – assumes further economic growth through the transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources. However, this is gradually proving to be neither socially desirable nor practically feasible, which I will try to prove further.

I want to emphasize that I have two fundamental reservations about the concept of sustainable development (and, analogously, to the Pact of Stability or Green Growth): one is theoretical, the other is practical. The theoretical one consists in the fact that the very notion of sustainable development is obviously self-contradictory, for either one is concerned with development, in this case growth, or with preservation, i.e. the conservation of the existing way of development. The practical side of the problem is more or less directly related to this, namely that the concept of the so-called sustainable development does not solve the whole problem of the climate crisis comprehensively. In a best-case scenario it only postpones it, or slows it down. To put it another way: it can help solve the problem, but it doesn’t solve it.



However, some may immediately object that, despite current experiments it is not possible to achieve acceptable ‘sustainable development’ with the help of new advanced technologies, such as carbon-free, non-fossil energy obtained through nuclear fusion, synthetic fuels, solar energy, *etc.*<sup>4</sup>

In answering this question, let’s consider, say, solar panels, which are often cited together with windmills as a model example of alternative, ‘renewable,’ ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’ energy acquisition. They certainly help and will help. But that’s only true until we ask the troubling question of what happens to solar panels at the end of their lifespan? Here, experts estimate that over thirty years, about 70 million tons of waste remain after these panels!

What’s more, the introduction of new technologies and energy-saving devices requires additional energy for waste transportation, storage, *etc.* In addition, new technologies can save labor and resources, but often only so that they can be used to increase production (and consumption) as well as process efficiency, which again increases the demands on available resources.<sup>5</sup>

---

4 It is worth noting that two opinions meet on this issue. One is optimistic when it claims that with the help of revolutionary knowledge and the introduction of revolutionary technologies, we can not only achieve sustainable development, but also overcome the climate crisis and return to the state that preceded it. The second, rather opposite opinion suggest that today we are already in a situation where the latest revolutionary knowledge and technologies can help us mitigate the impact of the climate crisis to the maximum extent possible through adaptation programs. Some researchers, such as André Gorz, go even further and claim that the ability of the environment to self-regenerate and self-organize is actually harmed by some advanced techniques and technologies that still tend to rationalize and control nature to make it predictable and calculable. At the same time, according to them, it is not enough to scientifically determine which techniques and which pollution thresholds are ecologically acceptable. Such an approach remains captive to industrialism with its hegemony of instrumental reason, which recognizes the need to limit the plundering of natural resources, but not to achieve ‘reconciliation’ with nature (Gorz, 1993).

5 I will cite one illustrative example. The historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan found out that something similar happened to housewives in the last century with the arrival of household

And so we find ourselves in the cycle of growth again! A constantly growing, even 'sustainable' economy will raise ever-new and growing demands for energy (although 'green' or 'renewable' energy) and also for waste transportation and disposal. At the same time, it is not difficult to guess that the best waste is the one that is not generated at all. Of course, that will never be possible. But one should at least strive to get as close to this ideal as possible.

I do not want to devalue or underestimate the importance of technical inventions and improvements in solving the current climate crisis. However, even the best, most advanced techniques and technologies offer only one solution. If they could really solve all ecological and climate problems, we might not even have to talk about a crisis today. Besides, as we know, no techniques and technologies are perfect. They have technical as well as economic, socio-political and ecological limits.

Another illustrative example here can be the recycling of goods and products, whose importance the program of sustainable development emphasizes. Even its local implementers point to problems with waste-free distribution of plastics or textile products and their subsequent use. In addition, energy, transport, production must be used for recycling. And every production is again just another intervention on nature. This whole process does not have to be efficient and bearable only from an economic point of view, but also from an ecological point of view.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it should be socially and politically

---

appliances such as vacuum cleaners and washing machines. Instead of saving them time for leisure activities, they worsened their lives because the demands for cleanliness rose to such an extent that they practically had no time left for anything else! (Ulej, 2023). In particular, the automatic washing machine caused families to wash their clothes more often: children no longer wear their T-shirts all week, but throw them in the washing machine after one day. The total time required for washing, and, I would add, the total energy burden were not reduced (Bella, 2005).

6 Recently, for example, it has been shown that during the manufacturing processes for plastics, their microparticles are released into the air, which can be even more dangerous for people's health.

acceptable. It is necessary to ask not only which mineral raw materials the sources of renewable energy come from, but also, for example, whether their mining places a further burden on the environment, under what conditions they are mined, who mines them and who gets the most profit from mining. It is generally known that the majority of mineral raw materials still come from the countries of the so-called third world, that they are often mined in inhumane conditions and that the final profit goes into the pockets of local political and economic elites or to more economically and technologically advanced states.

The fundamental imperfection of new techniques and technology is also manifested in the fact that, as a rule, they are at least one step behind reality, also due to the fact that they usually only deal with the consequences of the climate crisis. However, our task is first and foremost to eliminate its causes. To this end, even the latest technologies are not enough, because it is probably not in their power to change consumer habits, which are the most important here.

Hence, rather than hope for technical substitutions, whether within the so-called sustainable development or the so-called green economy, we should strive for a radical reduction in energy and material consumption in our overall way of life, which in turn is fully in line with the concept of degrowth.

#### 4. CAPITALISM AND DEGROWTH

Unfortunately, our current society, and specifically the capitalist system, still seems not only unable to do without economic growth, but also without *permanent* economic growth.<sup>7</sup> That's why as soon as

---

<sup>7</sup> I will refer here to Georges Bataille and his deep historical investigation of the roots and sources of capitalism, on the basis of which he comes to the conclusion that this economy from the very beginning has its own drive to constantly invest, which more broadly means that it prioritizes constant economic growth over consumption. Before the reformation, it was not like that at all. "There was no possibility of growth. A certain

the growth stops and sometimes slows down, the capitalist system gets into a crisis. From this, there seems to be a clear and only solution for degrowth: this system must be changed, immediately and radically!

Yet, even leftist-minded philosophers have doubts whether degrowth is compatible with capitalism or whether it is possible at all without giving up capitalism (Latouche, 2012, 93). I confess that I do not yet have a clear answer to these and similar questions.

On the surface, everything is clear: the essence, principles and very logic of the capitalist system are incompatible with the concept of degrowth. This is how Latouche finally answers his question: degrowth is essentially not only non-capitalist, but directly anti-capitalist, because it questions its nature, essence as the main condition for its realization (Latouche, 2012, 95). This concerns, first of all, the internal logic of the capitalist economy, which is based on the maximization of productivity, which in turn leads to the maximization of production, satisfaction of needs, profit, consumption of raw materials and energy, *etc.* (Gorz, 2022, 184). In other words, productivity, and with it the efficiency of production, drives growth, and this results in profit, which forces production to further increase productivity and efficiency, and so on. A well-known cyclical process that boils down to the following: profit for profit, growth for growth, *etc.*, which in turn causes, among other things, the constant plundering of natural resources, their often uneconomical waste (Gorz, 2022, 111) and, along with this, the gradually unbearable pollution of the air, which means the principled impossibility of a fundamental solution to the ecological and climate crisis.

However, as I have already indicated, this is not as obvious and simple as it seems at first glance. because the main difficulty, as right-wing economists and politicians (among others) point out,

---

development was only caused by the discovery of unused territories, technical changes, new products and, as a result, new needs" (Bataille, 1998, 134).

the immediate transition from the current capitalist society could mean something other than growth, namely big economic and social problems: unemployment, pauperization, problems with financing the public sector, such as education, health care, social security and services *etc.*

Also, as pointed out by left-wing thinkers (among others), we should never underestimate the strong adaptive capacity of capitalism, and especially its ability to turn everything into a commodity – including various subversive tendencies that, as soon as they appear, it tries to absorb immediately, to co-opt into its system of commodification.

Keeping such an ability in mind, I absolutely do not rule out the possibility, although I can't quite imagine yet that this would happen with degrowth, just like it happened with the so-called green growth or with 'sustainable development.' However, the very fact that capitalism tries to turn everything into a commodity does not automatically discredit the idea. For instance, the fact that veganism has been 'taken over' by McDonald's does not mean that under capitalism it is all one big fraud and that veganism loses its original meaning and significance.

It should also be borne in mind that capitalism has different, in some cases even opposing faces and forms – at least neoliberal, conservative and social-democratic ones.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the cult of growth does not apply exclusively to a capitalist society, but to everyone who has embarked on the path of industrialism and modernism. Therefore, degrowth is not only a criticism of capitalism, but more broadly of former socialist society and state capitalism as well (e.g., China, Russia). In short, it goes against all companies that unilaterally prefer (economic) growth.

---

<sup>8</sup> That is precisely why – as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari emphasize – in fact “there is no universal capitalism in itself, capitalism stands at the crossroads of all possible formations, it is always basically neo-capitalism – it invents its eastern and western face, its transformation – towards the worst” (Deleuze, Guattari, 2010, 29-30).

To my mind, that also explains the more cautious answers than we would otherwise expect from Latouche and Gorz to the principled question about the relationship between capitalism and degrowth. Specifically, Latouche still writes about the inevitable and radical change of society, when instead of the cult of growth, a new logic, a paradigm of degrowth, or a society without growth (*acroissance*) in which we can live better and at the same time work and consume less. However, this change, as he adds, should not consist in the radical elimination of private property, wage or monetary relations, or in the elimination of all capitalist institutions, but in their placement in a new logic (Latouche, 2012, 96-97). Gorz is even more clear when he claims that it is possible to change the nature of growth within capitalism when the production of material goods is changed into the production of immaterial goods (Gorz, 2022, 106). Therefore, the end of growth does not necessarily mean the end of capitalism (Gorz, 2022, 175). Thus, “it is not important to attack growth, but rather to attack its mystification” (Gorz, 2022, 21).

Let’s concede for a moment that they are right about all this. However, the question then remains, to what extent would this change the nature of the problems associated with growth? How much would it solve the climate crisis?

Therefore, let’s go back to degrowth and remember that its main mission and ultimate meaning is to create favorable conditions for a good quality of life. However, because history does not have a single meaning, we discover multiple possibilities for living well (Latour, 2023a). Hence, we must first of all clarify what we ultimately promise ourselves from life and what values we consider valuable, important in fulfilling a good life and how we want to achieve it.

## 5. DEGROWTH AS A RADICAL CHANGE IN THE WAY OF LIFE

As known, since antiquity the issue of the good life has been a key philosophical question and its concept has been usually associated

with restraint, or moderation, with the taming of passions and the limitation of needs. More precisely, it has been about limiting material needs. In general, the belief that material wealth, social status, political power and other external factors are not important for the realization of a good life goes back to ancient philosophy. In this sense, spiritual values above all are supported by education and various spiritual exercises. The most important of them is asceticism as a means of achieving moderation and self-control, i.e. – as already mentioned – the main conditions of a good life and the true happiness associated with it. I will note in passing that among ancient thinkers there is not even a mention of (economic) growth as a condition for a good life. Rather, the conditions for a good human life are discussed in terms of the necessity to live in harmony with nature and with one's nature. And the degrowth discourse basically says the same thing: we can be happier with less wealth if we listen more to nature and our real, 'natural' needs.

Bruno Latour, in his most recent and last self-written book (Latour, 2023b), claims that the pandemic gave us the opportunity to realize that the most important thing for people is not the level of the gross domestic product or the *standard of living* achieved, but above all the *quality of life*: how we live and how satisfied we are in general with our own lives. Here we can observe that the immediate "link between 'more' and 'better' has been broken forever. 'Better' today means 'less.' To create a *minimum* of needs, to fulfill them with the *smallest* possible consumption of raw materials, energy, and work and to cause *the least* possible harmful effects" (Gorz, 2022, 184).

However – is this feasible? And how much are we willing to sacrifice for it? Isn't that asking too much of us? And when, if not now, can we get to unprecedented prosperity? Or do we have to give it all up once and for all right now?

Perhaps these are again just wrongly posed questions, because today something much more serious, more fundamental, needs to be

addressed: people's "elementary" survival.<sup>9</sup> In this situation, the main question is not what we would like,<sup>10</sup> but what is *possible* and what is *necessary* (Zin, 2010). Is it really necessary for us to constantly buy and surround ourselves with things that we don't even use?

The logic of 'more and more' must therefore be replaced by the inexorable logic of 'less and less.' It seems very simple. As if only one principle were to replace another; one standard, another value; one type of activity, another. However, nothing else would be so reminiscent of the spirit of modernism as to think in the logic of disjunction 'or/or' and mutual denial and exclusion; to seek to 'burn bridges behind us', as Latour called it; to excavate an impassable chasm between the past and the future (Latour, 2023b, 74). In short, of the spirit from which Latour and ultimately the concept of degrowth itself are trying to detach.

Degrowth does not just replace or compensate; it is not just something 'in place' of another, different concept. It is not the same as renewal, as it is sometimes argued. The term 'restoration' can evoke the idea of (extended) reproduction of the original state, previous conditions, previous way of life without fundamental changes (the so-called 'return to normal', as we used to say with respect to the end of the pandemic situation).

In short, the concept of degrowth requires first of all a radical restructuring of our way of life. By radicalism I mean – with

---

9 There was no longer a rapid population growth to raise the fundamental question of how to survive. Not so long ago, around the 1950s, thanks to the Club of Rome, we thought that if the world's population doubled, our planet would not support it. By the end of 2022 the population reached the until recently "unimaginable" 8 billion inhabitants, and it seems that, apart from experts and activists, no one else noticed. Not that the reasons for serious concern about this trend have disappeared. Rather, the more serious problem here is not the rapid population growth itself, but the Western, predatory and imperial way of life.

10 At the same time, it is not even entirely clear whether we even know what we would like and what we would be able to agree on with other people and civilizations.



Latour – more content than form in the implementation of changes: a radical change in thinking and action, in people’s behavior.<sup>11</sup>

Such a radical change in the way of life is not only an ethical, but also a necessary social and political task, a requirement: you have to prepare to fight for a way of life, which will probably not be easy, because no party will want to simply (e.g., just by enlightenment) give up their position, the way of life to which they are accustomed and which they consider to be the only possible and reasonable one. Perhaps aware of this complex, difficult task, and despite everything said so far, Latour finally gave up on the idea of degrowth as a *real alternative* to solving the climate crisis.

## 6. DEGROWTH – JUST A UTOPIA?

I get directly to the key question of my paper: To what extent is the concept of degrowth realistically possible, feasible? Also: To what extent is it attractive enough for people to have a reason to follow it, fight for it, or sacrifice themselves for it in some way?

As I have already indicated, Latour’s answer here is surprisingly unequivocal: it is not attractive to people and is therefore unrealistic (Latour, 2023a). I have at least one fundamental disagreement about this. Just because something is difficult to achieve, it does not mean that it is also impossible. The meaning of a utopia is, as Gorz reminds us, “to free the imagination as much as possible to accommodate everything we can do to change life” (Gorz, 2022, 202). The boundaries between utopia and reality are not permanent or impassable. On the contrary, they can shift to such an extent that something considered a utopia until recently becomes a reality, and vice versa. In other words, we are getting into a situation where some

---

<sup>11</sup> On this I disagree with Latouche, who presents degrowth as a kind of moderate variant of changes, although at the same time he considers it more revolutionary than reform (Latouche, 2012, 71).

ideas that were not long ago considered utopian become not only real or realistic, but also necessary – otherwise we will not survive as humanity. Perhaps it is the current capitalist system and consumer society that are gradually becoming completely utopian (Zin, 2010) in a negative sense.

From a completely different point of view, although with the same or very similar results, Latouche approaches degrowth with relation to utopia and reality, when he unabashedly labels his idea a utopia and a source of dreams and hope and at the same time as a real project that seeks to explore the objective possibility of its realization (Latouche, 2012, 38). It is therefore a utopia in the truest sense of the word, as it offers a project for the ideal functioning of society, and at the same time it is a concrete project based on facts and ideas aimed at its real accomplishment (Latouche, 2012, 47).

Nevertheless, I am under no illusions. People continue to adhere to an unchanged way of life not because they are not aware of the more or less imminent threat in the form of a harmful and irreversible climate change, but because they do not feel prepared, or they are still not sufficiently motivated to make fundamental changes in their (consumer) behavior.<sup>12</sup> It is also necessary to realistically admit that most people do not associate emancipation or freedom with lofty ideas, thoughts and goals, but primarily equate them with escaping poverty and discomfort, or with wealth and prosperity, while degrowth, even in the mouth of climate activists, is often associated with feelings of guilt, obligation and the requirement to observe strict restrictions. If this is really to be the case, then it will be very difficult to explain to people why in the current situation it is not only right, reasonable and good, but directly vital and necessary to lean more

---

<sup>12</sup> This is repeatedly confirmed by personal experience and public opinion polls, according to which the majority of EU residents are favorably disposed to government measures aimed at solving the ecological and climate crisis, with the exception of measures related to a more fundamental change in their way of life. On the latter, only a minority of EU residents would agree to greater restrictions.

about degrowth than growth. As for the latter, if at all we should lean toward growth on a spiritual level.

How could degrowth attract the poorer, unemployed, or the socially excluded more than economic growth? Or, why should the so-called developing countries moderate, stop or at least slow down their growth, when they themselves did not cause climate change and its negative consequences, but actually are one of the consequences of climate change and often face its negative consequences the most?

The answer here seems to follow directly from the question: precisely because the negative consequences of economic growth affect all countries without exception. Mostly, it affects developing countries and always the poorest. They have nowhere to hide or escape from the climate crisis.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, in order to properly mobilize people, you have to convince them that their lives are really at stake right now. Even that is not enough. People need to be positively motivated. As Latouche emphasizes by alluding to Max Weber and his opposite term “*Entzauberung*” (disenchantment – of the world), “without the »new enchantment« of life and by life, degrowth would also be doomed to failure” (Latouche, 2012, 90). As far as richer countries and more solvent inhabitants of the planet are concerned, they also need to be convinced that degrowth also means exchanging polluted air for

---

13 The adverse consequences of growth are several times more severe in those countries and result in contaminated air, long-term drought, flash floods, lack of food, drinking and usable water, increased flooding of island countries, etc. It is also evident that China’s and India’s growth is already creating a new global problem. And let’s not be mistaken here either. Developing countries often treat each other as selfishly as developed Western countries treat the rest of the world, for example, by building water dams on the upper reaches of rivers, thereby limiting access to these water sources from the lower reaches (e.g., the conflict between China and neighboring countries or between Ethiopia and Egypt). This once again confirms one of the main objections to the growth economy, i.e. that it behaves like an isolated individual who acts only in his own interest and does not care about the negative consequences of his actions, including the effects they have on his neighbors (Bataille, 1998, 207).

clean air, polluted water for clean water, life of constant stress for a calmer and healthier way of life, *etc.*<sup>14</sup> That the only way to live better is to produce less, consume less, work less, spend less. In short, to live differently (Gorz, 2022, 88). It will also be necessary to strictly separate the needs that lead to the flourishing of personal strengths and abilities (especially the ability to take control of one's life) from the needs that tend to increase the consumption of goods and dependence (Gorz, 2012, 126). In this context, Gorz talks, for example, about the free choice of free time, which will create more space for people's self-production and self-regulation, and at the same time for their greater, livelier cooperation and mutual assistance. Only in this way will a person be able to feel joy from what he does and what he gives and not from what he consumes and receives (Gorz, 2012, 125).

However, as it has already been emphasized, degrowth is not (and must not be) only a call to "minimalism" and a return to the past, to traditional forms and ways of life. In fact, it is primarily directed against redundant, sometimes senseless comfort and the waste associated with it.

For this reason, too, the social and political context of the entire issue must be included under degrowth – social equality and justice, real democratization of social life, the right to a dignified and fulfilling life, *etc.* On the other hand, it is already clear that degrowth will also hurt some people: owners of capital, families with enormous wealth, corporations profiting from risky labor, *etc.* (Barlow, 2023).

Therefore, it is not surprising that, even if we may not be fully aware of it yet, the struggle for degrowth (and I also dream of the struggle for a radically new way of life), for and against it, has already begun!

---

<sup>14</sup> Currently, a number of regions and countries (most recently Portugal) boasted similar results and proceeded to shorten the working week from five to four days. These results show that people have more time to devote to family, friends, hobbies, sports, *etc.*, which ultimately has a positive effect on the overall health and satisfaction of the population.

And what will ultimately come out of it, which path we will take, only time will tell. Perhaps very soon.

## 7. CONCLUSION

I would once again remind the reader and emphasize the following. There are several similarities between economic growth and capitalism. One of them consists in the fact that neither one nor the other practically admits social alternatives. If you are looking for an alternative, it is of a technical or technological nature, which could partially modify the course of development, but not change it in any fundamental way. This would be the generally and internationally recognized strategy of so-called sustainable development. This is not at all a coincidence, because in addition to generic claims about the protection of humanity and the Earth, this strategy also has another, far from green, pro-capitalist dimension, which primarily seeks profit.

The main goal of this article is to offer another, radically different alternative, represented by the concept of degrowth. As further emphasized here, degrowth, despite its radical definition, is not the simple opposite of growth, or negative growth, but rather it is development without one-sided (economic) growth. It is a multifaceted development, after ever-widening the space for people's free time and self-realization. And if I mention growth, then it is growth especially in the spiritual sense of the word – growth of free time, personality development, freedom.

I tried to answer the key question of this article, whether degrowth is practically feasible, and thus, whether it is also realistic, with a counter-question: do we have, or soon will have, another option in the situation of an ever-deepening climate crisis? However, in order for degrowth to be feasible, at least one more condition must be met: it must become attractive enough so that people want to actively participate in this radical change – a change in their entire way of life

in the name of life itself, for greater freedom and self-realization. In other words, necessity and freedom must meet and connect with each other.

On the contrary, the answer to the question of whether capitalism, although it has been organically merged with economic growth since its inception, can finally embark on a trajectory of non-growth is not clear-cut. What is certain is that, being oriented toward constant growth it will encounter more and more obstacles and contradictions, until it finds itself at a point where such an orientation becomes unsustainable. In this way, growth as the (only possible) reality turns into a (no longer feasible) utopia. However, the history of capitalism shows its extraordinary capacity for self-defense and adaptation. And in view of this, the question of the (in)compatibility of capitalism and degrowth (at least for now) is still open.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abraham, Y.M. (2023). Qu'est-ce que la décroissance? Aujourd'hui, le mouvement fleurit au Québec. *Briarpatch*, (April 29). <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/quest-ce-que-la-decroissance>.
- Barlow, N. (2023). *Rozkvět uvnitř planetárních mezí*. <https://jasuteren.cz/media/pages/cedit/302609557-1676035289/10-1.pdf>.
- Bataille, G. (1998). *Prokletá část. Teorie náboženství*. Herrmann & synové. [(1992). *The cursed Part. Theory of Religion*. Zone Books].
- Bella, T. (2005). *Pozor na techniku, ktorá "šetrí čas"*. <https://tech.sme.sk/c/2499334/pozor-na-techniku-ktora-setri-cas.html>.
- Bláhová, M. (2008). Šťastie a ekonomický rast – vzájomné vzťahy a súvislosti. *Ekonomika a management*, 3. <https://vse.cz/eam/vse.cz/eam/44.html>.
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (2010). *Tisíc plosín*. Herrmann & synové. [(1980). *Mille Plateaux*. Les Éditions de minuit].
- Gorz, A. (1993). Political Ecology: Expertocracy versus Self-Limitation. *New Left Review*, 201. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i202/articles/andre-gorz-political-ecology-expertocracy-versus-self-limitation.pdf>.
- Gorz, A. (2012). *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology*. Verso.
- Gorz, A. (2022). *Ekológia a politika. Ekológia a sloboda*. O.Z. kapitalks.

- Latouche, S. (2012). *Malé pojednání o poklidném nerůstu*. Za tratí.
- Latour, B. (2023a). *Ekologie je nový třídní boj*. <https://jasuteren.cz/media/pages/cedit/302609557-1676035289/10-1.pdf>.
- Latour, B. (2023b). *Kde to jsem? Poučení z lockdownu pro pozemšťany*. Neklid.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1999). *Rasa a dějiny*. Atlantis. [(1952). *Race and history*. UNESCO].
- Lipovetsky, G. (2007). *Paradoxní štěstí. Esej o hyperkonzumní společnosti*. Prostor.
- Ruppeltdová, S. (2022). *Návrat k politické ekologii*. In A. Gorz, *Ekologie a politika, ekologie a Sloboda* (7-10). O.Z. kapitalks.
- Ulej, T. (2023). *Schopnosť oddychovať si nekúpiš za žiadne peniaze*. <https://dennikn.sk/3604277/schopnost-oddychovat-si-nekupis-za-ziadne-peniaze/>.
- Zin, J. (2010). *Qu'est-ce que l'écologie-politique?*. <https://jeanzin.fr/2010/01/21/qu-est-ce-que-l-ecologie-politique/>.

---

**IVAN BURAJ**

Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave

(Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3465-2355>

[ivan.buraj@uniba.sk](mailto:ivan.buraj@uniba.sk)

DOI 10.21697/spch.2024.60.A.19



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Received: 19/06/2024. Reviewed: 3/10/2024. Accepted: 5/11/2024.