

# In What Way Does Degrowth Reconstruct the Ethical System of Modernity?

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## I. Introduction

The modern civilization has for a long time organized its material life with a firm confidence in the productivist model of economic development. However, cumulative effects of the global environmental crisis since the 1970s continuously undermine the very basis of such belief. It would seem that the world is at a crossroads. Whilst growing number of scientific researches demonstrate unsustainability of the prevailing model of development, the international policy debate on development still holds to the longstanding paradigm of productivism. The UN Earth Summit 2012 (i.e. Rio+20) is a latest example. In the name of sustainable development, it opted for a ‘green economic growth’ policy (i.e. the green economy), permitting further commercialization of nature to the detriment of strong sustainability.

As Dennis Meadows warns on the occasion of forty-year anniversary of *Limits to Growth*, ‘the result is clear: we are on the way to the fall of civilization and it is too late to return to the scenario of equilibrium’ (Meadows, 2012, p.88). In reflecting on the international policy debates of past decades, he argues that the problem lies not in technical dimension but in social and cultural dimension. He concludes that ‘it is not difficult to provide technical solutions. It is social and cultural obstacles that impede the civilizational change’ (*ibid.*, p.90).

Meadows’ remark suggests the necessity of changing goals and norms of developmental philosophy. It is needed to critically examine the socio-cultural

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basis of productivist development model and to imagine possible alternatives under a different paradigm.

From this vantage, Serge Latouche's *Sortir de la société de consommation* (SSC) (2010) makes a fresh contribution to our understanding the problem of development. In this book, he discusses limitations of productivist development model by illuminating flaws in its ethical system. In this article, I examine the contents of the book in the following manner. In the second section, I briefly introduce a trajectory of Latouche's work. In the third section, I discuss his critique of the ethical system of modernity. In the fourth section, I examine alternative ethics elaborated in SSC. In the concluding section, I remark the contribution of Latouche's work to the Japanese debate on degrowth.

## II. Background

Serge Latouche is a key theorist in the 'post-development' school of thought. Since the 1980s, his critique of the modern industrial civilization, especially the paradigms of development and the economic sciences, has made a significant contribution to reframing the debate on normative aspects of development projects and North-South relations.

Today he is well known in the continental Europe as a leading theorist of degrowth (*décroissance*). Degrowth is a societal project of transforming advanced industrial societies to socially and ecologically sustainable societies. Its principal aim is to dismantle a widely shared belief in the productivist model of development, i.e. the ideology of unlimited economic growth, and to reconstruct industrial societies according to the ideal of ecological democracy (Latouche, 2006, 2007).

In recent years the idea of degrowth attracted and continues to attract a number of researchers, and the related works have been produced, which discuss various themes concerning degrowth (Bernard ed., 2003; Besson-Girard, 2005; Bonaiuti ed., 2006; Cassiari, 2009; Cheynet, 2008; Latouche, 2006, 2007; Mongeau ed,2007; Mylond ed., 2008; Ridoux, 2006)<sup>(1)</sup>. The biannual international conference on degrowth has also been held since 2008. The term

‘degrowth’ has been translated into various languages (especially in the Latin world) and appeared at the international forum for global justice movement, such as the 2009 World Social Forum in Belem, Brazil<sup>(2)</sup>.

So far the debate focuses on critique of growth-based economy, followed by a prospect of the local politics of degrowth as an alternative. In this intellectual circumstance, SSC occupies a singular position because it discusses degrowth in a broader historical and philosophical context, paving the way for the reconstruction of the ethical system of modernity.

SSC is therefore conceived of as a deepening and a synthesis of Latouche’s past critique of modern civilization and the paradigms of modern sciences and political economy. On the one hand, it reworks some of the theses that he elaborated in *L’Occidentalisation du monde* (1989), a book that critically examined the civilizational structure of Western modernity. On the other hand it provides further elaboration of his critique of techno-scientific and economic rationalities, discussed in *La Megamachine* (1995) and *Déraison de la raison économique* (2001).

SSC consists of ten chapters. The topics discussed in each chapter vary from global warming and technology to education and the recent financial crises, but each topic illustrates an ethics of degrowth in its own manner. In what follows I shall delineate the main line of argument and bring to light the underlying philosophical implications of the book.

### **III. Ethical Contradiction of Consumerist Society**

In SSC, Latouche begins discussion with a diagnosis of the state of the world facing a catastrophe triggered by the global environmental degradation. In

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- (1) Apart from these collective and single authors’ works, in France, the biannually journal called *ENTROPIA* has been published since 2006. This journal aims to provide theoretical examination of various topics related to degrowth, such as work, technology, local democracy, territory-based economy, financial crisis and the Fukushima nuclear accident.
  - (2) Degrowth was introduced to the 2009 World Social Forum as a key concept for critiquing the productivist model of development that has negative effects on biodiversity (Massiah, 2011).

referring to recent scientific researches showing growing ecological footprints and loss of biodiversity on Earth, he states that a major cause of the catastrophe is attributed to the globalization of the productivist development model consuming natural resources beyond Earth's biocapacity (Latouche, 2010, Ch.1). According to Latouche, the aberration of the development path of advanced industrial societies is closely associated with the loss of a sense of limit; the modern industrial civilization fell in a state of incontinence to such an extent that its pursuit of material wealth destroys the very condition of its own survival.

Latouche provides an original analysis in his investigation of the origin of incontinence. The first object of enquiry is a particular conception of life in Western modernity. He argues, drawing on Jérôme Baschet, that the globalization of industrial civilization is conceived of as a phenomenon that 'applies the logic of market to all aspects of life', i.e. 'the becoming-commodity of the world' (*ibid.*, p.26). Latouche stresses that such a perspective of life is not found in the majority of non-Western cultures for which 'life, mysterious as it is, is a marvelous gift' (*ibid.*, p.10).

Here Latouche's argument resonates with several currents of late twentieth century critics of modern civilizations such as Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, George Batailles and Claude Levi-Strauss. These critics, despite the difference of their philosophies, commonly problematized epistemological foundations of modernity, i.e. the modern civilization reduces diverse forms of life to lifeless objects according to economic and techno-scientific rationalities. Such an enquiry into the state of life in modernity is lively present in Latouche's thought. It follows from this that his project of degrowth constitutes part of broad currents of philosophy of life emerged on the planet since the last century.

Secondly Latouche examines an anthropocentrism of Western modernity and its aberrant evolution. The modern Western civilization organizes its material life on the basis of a particular cosmology that places human beings at the center of the world. The cosmology of Western modernity clearly demarcates the human world from the natural world, removing the latter out of focus. It permits human beings to pursue the production and the possession of material

wealth to the detriment of the reproductive capacity of the natural world.

Latouche ascertains the traces of the modernist vision of anthropocentrism in the paradigm of political economy. He chastises Adam Smith's economic thought for establishing a principle of *immunitas* against *communitas* (*ibid.*, p.87). By adopting a contractual vision of society derived from the modern individualism, Smith's political economy, Latouche argues, denies the dimension of *munus* (i.e. gift) in constituting human relations. In turn, it introduces a vision of the world in which the possession of private property is a basic guarantor of the security of individual life (*ibid.*). It omits the dimension of reciprocity which Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi identified as a source of sociality.

The denial of gift and reciprocity is particularly strong in the representation of rational economic man (*homo oeconomicus*). *Homo oeconomicus* is an imaginary figure that does not owe anything to others. It denies original dependence of man on the natural world and other fellow human beings. In so doing, it rejects to return debt to Earth and societies and continues the exploitation of nature and other human beings for the maximization of individual utility. Such an imaginary figure has become a norm of human behavior and come to govern social life as industrial civilization expands its scale and sphere of commercialization.

It should be noted that critique of rational economic man and re-elaboration of embedded nature of human existence are not new in themselves. Such arguments have been elaborated by French anti-utilitarian social theorists for the past two decades (Caillé, 2000, 2005; Chaniel, 2008; Godbout, 1992, 2007). Latouche's originality lies in that he radicalizes these authors' theses through the lens of existential philosophy. He refers to another dimension of gift which has not fully been discussed in the literature of anthropology and sociology: 'the gift of being' (Latouche, 2010, p.77). Commercialization of nature and the rise of environmental pollutions and destruction, he argues, illustrate the 'forgetting of being' in the productivist industrial society (*ibid.*). In the same vein, he denounces the project of transhumanism as a refusal of the human condition, which eventually leads to further technological control of life (*ibid.*). In this way

Latouche brings to light original indebtedness of human existence, i.e. human beings embedded not only in social relations but, more fundamentally, in Earth's living system.

It is clear from this vantage that, for Latouche, the state of incontinence in the productivist industrial society comes from the modern man's indifference to other living beings supporting his life. He employs Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil for several times to characterize the economic life of consumerist society (Latouche, 2010, p.80, p.159, p.203). For him, the problem of consumerist society lies in its incapacity of imagining singularities of other living beings and consequences of one's own economic choices on them, hence incapacity of delimiting one's economic power, both production and consumption, in front of other humans and nature. Such an argument by Latouche can be understood more clearly by recourse to Arendt's notion of the common world. That the globalized society of consumers, its productivist industrial development model, destroys biosphere, hence the conditions of life, can be conceived of as a loss of the common world where diverse forms of life, human and non-human, are preserved. Put it in Arendt's term again, it can be said that Latouche reveals a rampant situation of 'worldlessness' brought about by the globalization of industrial civilization.

#### **IV. Reconstruction of Ethics**

Critique of consumerist society leads Latouche to reconstruct ethical system of modernity. For this purpose he sheds light on several currents of ethical theories and practices that serve as alternatives to productivist development model.

The first current considered is the recent Latin American indigenous movements, such as the Zapatista movement in Southern Mexico and Bolivia's and Ecuador's experiments of redefining national developmental goals as *buen vivir* ('to live well'). In these movements, he identifies the emergence of new sociocultural objectives resonating with those of degrowth, such as liberation of the victims of (neo-)colonialism and neoliberal globalization, recognition of and

respect for cultural diversity and the rights of nature, and enhancement of local autonomy (Latouche, 2010, Introduction). He imagines a potential contribution of these Latin American experiments to the construction of a post-development era.

The second current examined is alternative economic theories in the continental Europe, notably Arnaud Berthoud's philosophy of consumption (France) and Luigino Bruni's citizens' economy (Italy) (Latouche, 2010, Ch.3). Both theories are inspired by the Aristotelian ethics and seek to break with the paradigm of the modern economic sciences, especially that of rational economic man. In the first place, Berthoud's philosophy of consumption (Berthoud, 2005) rejects a widely shared view of consumption as an act of purchasing commodities. In its stead, it redefines the notion of consumption as a good use of fellow human beings to sustain one's life. Berthoud remarks that, in Aristotle's philosophy, such an alternative notion of consumption is associated with praxis (*ibid.*, p.45). In Berthoud's theory, an agent's economic choice is not separated from his concrete living environment and, to paraphrase Aristotle, is always regulated by an ideal of making a community of friendship (*philia*). In the second place, the citizens' economy seeks to revive the heritage of the eighteenth century Napoli school of economics, a successor of Thomas Aquinas' ethics, and proposes to reconstruct economic activities according to civic virtues and a conduct of just government. Latouche recognizes these theories as an attempt at introducing ethics to economics but suspects whether such attempts survive in the modern paradigm of economics which, to his understanding, is anti-moral in essence (Latouche, 2010, pp.81-82). He argues, in turn, that these theories can be further elaborated under the paradigm of degrowth (Latouche, 2010, p.82).

The third current also comes from the continental Europe but from a different tradition. It is the philosophies of Ivan Illich (Latouche, 2010, Ch.4) and Cornelius Castoriadis (*ibid.*, Ch.6). It is well known that Latouche has for a long time identified these critics of industrial societies as precursors of degrowth. This time, however, he focuses on the influence of Aristotle on them and examines their philosophies as a variation of the Aristotelian tradition of ethics.

Such an interpretation helps us to clarify these two philosophers' positions in the European tradition of ethics and, together with the aforementioned works of Berthoud and Bruni, the importance of the Aristotelian ethics to counteract the prevailing utilitarianism in economic sciences. Latouche explains Illich's and Castoriadis' respective notions of autonomy; the former elaborated autonomy in the light of technics and the latter, politics (*ibid.*, p143). However, Latouche's explanation also reveals that, despite the difference, both philosophers lay emphasis on an ethics of self-limitation to reactivate autonomy. For Illich and Castoriadis, to delimit the exponential growth of industrial economy and to live one's life with an adequate sense of limit are necessary steps toward the construction of a sustainable and decent society of degrowth. The claim for recovering a sense of limit, commonly found in Illich and Castoriadis, is conceived of as a trace of Aristotelian ethics which denounces incontinence.

The last current considered is the tradition of Eastern philosophy. In the concluding chapter entitled *La Tao de la décroissance*, Latouche briefly introduces Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-Tseu and Japanese Zen Buddhism and positively evaluates them as a teaching that helps to cultivate continence in everyday life. He states that the vision of degrowth can be gleaned from the Eastern tradition as well as from the aforementioned Latin American and alternative European traditions.

Overall, Latouche's reference to these currents of ethical theories and practices suggests that an ethics of degrowth takes a form of communitarian ethics. In contradistinction to the abstract and atomistic individualism of rational economic man, degrowth derives its normative principles from the conception of a human being embedded in complex social and ecological relations. The paradigm of degrowth acknowledges original indebtedness of human existence, i.e. the fact that human life is a gift from a manifold of relationships. This means that moral quality of human action is always examined in front of those diverse relationships surrounding one's life. As opposed to the modern idea of possessive individualism, concrete human reality asks each and every human being to 'coexist well with others' (*convivir bien*), as Bolivia's new social

development goal, ‘buen vivir’, implies<sup>(3)</sup>. It follows from this that human beings, both individuals and collectives, must cultivate a sense of decency and a capacity of delimiting one’s power over other human beings and species, so that each and every living being has a legitimate place to live in a shared social space.

It can be said from this that Latouche elaborates an ethics of degrowth in its most original meaning: *ethos*. As Heidegger states, the Greek word *ethos* means ‘abode’, ‘dwelling place’: it refers to ‘an open region in which man dwells’ (Heidegger, 1993, p.256). Therefore, ethics, taken in its original sense, aims to ‘ponder the abode of man’, that which ‘contains and preserves the advent of what belongs to man in his essence’ (*ibid.*, p.256, p.258). In the similar vein, when Latouche claims change of consumerist lifestyles, he leads us to rethink ontological constituents of human beings. This point is clear as he argues that degrowth aims to transform both the order of words and the order of things (Latouche, 2010, Ch.2). The ethics of degrowth thus goes hand in hand with transformation of the cosmological order of modernity, including relationships between the human and the natural worlds, between mind and body, and between self and other. It aims to recover man’s awareness of what constitute his life, his original debt to other living beings, so as to rethink humanity’s position on the planet.

## V. Conclusion

As Stephen Toulmin (1989) explains, the modern civilization has long since organized social order according to a cosmology peculiar to the seventeenth century Europe. The modern scientific paradigm, notably the Cartesian epistemology, introduced a mechanical conception of nature and life and justified technological control of human body and nature. Once this mechanical

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(3) As Xavier Albó from Bolivia explicates by reference to local Aymara language *Suma Qamana*, the fullest meaning of *buen vivir* is *convivir bien* (to coexist well); it refers to a communal way of living which cultivates a sense of respect, equality, solidarity, harmony, and equity’ (Albó, 17 February, 2008).

vision was transposed to social sphere, the human world became constructed according to scientific and technological rationalities. This is the reason why Castoriadis argues that the modern civilization is constituted by the social imaginary significations that center on rational mastery of humans and nature (Castoriadis, 1991, p.221). The modern economic life based on productivist industrial development model is no exception. It augmented its productive power through the advancement of scientific and technological knowledge reducing diverse living beings to lifeless objects. The ecological crisis is a consequence of such an aberrant expansion of anthropocentrism based on the modern Western cosmology.

Therefore, change of consumerist lifestyles we live today is not just technical but, more fundamentally, cultural or cosmological issues. It requires a change in the modern cosmological order and the corresponding ethical system. Latouche's *Sortir de la société de consommation* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding the problems of globalized consumerist societies. It critically examines the modern paradigm of political economy and its ethical deficiency. Furthermore it explores alternative cosmologies and ethics, drawing on several philosophical currents and social experiments. It paves the way for a new research program for an ethics of degrowth.

Latouche's work is also pertinent to the Japanese debate on degrowth. In Japan, critique of development and economic growth has been instigated by heterodox economists and sociologists since the 1970s. In particular, a theory comparable to degrowth has been elaborated during the early 1980s by Yoshirou Tamanoi, an ecological economist influenced by the works of Georgescu-Roegen, Illich and Polanyi. Tamanoi's work has contributed to the founding of the Japan Society for Entropy and the formation of a Japanese school of peace studies (i.e. Environment and Peace Research Group). The debate on degrowth is still marginal in Japan but relevant works are recently being produced, such as theory of global steady-state society (Hiroi, 2008), new theory of community (Uchiyama, 2010), and theory of post-growth society (Nishikawa, 2011). On this occasion of the publication of the Japanese translation of *Sortir de la société*

*de consommation*, it is worthy of exploring a dialogue between European and Japanese visions of degrowth.

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## **In What Way Does Degrowth Reconstruct the Ethical System of Modernity?**

<Summary>

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This article examines Serge Latouche's *Sortir de la société de consommation* (2010) whose Japanese translation will be published in the spring of 2013. The article scrutinizes Latouche's project of degrowth by focusing particularly on his critique of the ethical system of modernity. I will demonstrate the ways he traces the philosophical origins of incontinence of globalized consumerist society. Then I discuss degrowth as a project of reconstructing a communitarian ethics, as opposed to the abstract and atomistic individualism of rational economic man (*homo oeconomicus*). I conclude the article with a remark on the contribution of Latouche's work to the Japanese debate on degrowth.

