The controversies over (de)growth

Lecture for CEMUS Oct 2015

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Outline

1. Degrowth (history and characterization)
2. Critique and misunderstanding
3. The degrowth paradox: or, why radical transformation is never radical
4. Rival interpretations of the social effects of economization
5. Questions outstanding
Long history of growth and degrowth

METABOLIC PROFILES
Energy input for...

...hunter-and-gatherer societies:
10 GJ/cap/yr (biomass)

...agrarian societies:
65 GJ/cap/yr (biomass)

...industrial societies:
250 GJ/cap/yr (fossil-, hydro- & nuclear energy, + biomass)
Short history of degrowth
Degrowth: a characterisation

• “An equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions” (Schneider et al. 2010: 511).

• Voluntary reduction in capacities to exploit resources
"Until the fence is fixed, we're going to rely on self-discipline."
Figure 1. The degrowth transition to a steady state economy. SSE stands for Steady-State Economy (from O’Neill 2011, 2).
What makes degrowth different?
No faith in (only)...

- Capitalism
- Technology
- Academia
- Bio-physical
- Eco-efficiency
- Decoupling
- Kuznets curves
Is growth always bad?
Breakthrough Institute
Do we all need to degrow?
Will degrowth lead to societal collapse?
Thou shall not...
THE ONLY SUSTAINABLE GROWTH IS DEGROWTH
Rival interpretations
1. The Doux-commerce Thesis

• “it is almost a general rule that wherever manners are gentle there is commerce; and wherever there is commerce, manners are gentle” (Montesquieu 1749)
• “Manners have become more gentle through the influence of the spirit of commerce and industry, those enemies of violence and turmoil, which cause wealth to flee” (Condoret 1795).

• “Commerce attaches men one to another through mutual utility. Through commerce the moral and physical passions are superseded by interest” (Ricard 1781)
2. The Self-destruction Thesis

• “As individual behavior has been increasingly directed to individual advantage, habits and instincts based on communal attitudes and objectives have lost out. The weakening of traditional social values has made predominantly capitalist economies more difficult to manage” (Hirsch 1976, 117-18).
3. The Feudal-Shackles and -blessings Thesis
Summary

- Doux commerce: commoditization and capitalism create moral environment for ‘good society’ to flourish
- Self-destruction: Market society produces individualism which corrodes social and public values and hence collaboration
- Feudal shackles: feudal residues prevent doux commerce
- Feudal blessings: residues are important element for social and ideological diversity and thus liberal traditions and democracy
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive effects</th>
<th>Negative effects</th>
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<td><strong>Dominance of the market</strong></td>
<td>Doux commerce</td>
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<td>Self-destruction</td>
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<td><strong>Influential persistence of pre-capitalist forms</strong></td>
<td>Feudal blessings</td>
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Mixing for more nuanciation

- Simple thesis only holds portion of the full truth and needs complementation
- Residues or legacies hamper development of new era/movement, while providing elements that it requires
- Both self-reinforcing and self-undermining
- Commercialisation creates trust and empathy, but also individualism and instrumental reason
More reading

• Biermans 2012 Decency and the market
• Sandel 2012 What money can’t buy. The moral limits of markets
Market boundaries

• “The fact that the market will not generate morally beneficial outcomes all by itself means that a better understanding of the market and its boundaries is needed” (Biermans 2012: 189)
LESS BAD + MORE GOOD = DEGROWTH?
How to judge where and when degrowth is needed – Grounding market boundaries

- In which parts of society is the market allowed to operate?
- To what extent are essential goods and services provided for?
- To what extent are ecologies conserved?
Thank you!

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