

13. The triple nature of the crisis – Are growth-oriented economies able to handle it? An alternative: The theory of de-growth

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The world has been facing an economic crisis from 2008 and is still trying to overcome it. The current crisis has two forgotten dimensions – social and environmental – which started decades ago.

Territorial and income inequalities are widening at all levels – global, national and regional – despite of the economic growth of the last decades. In addition, after meeting the basic needs – e.g. food, drinking water and healthcare – happiness does not correlate strongly with material well-being but rather with other qualitative factors influencing our lives.

Moreover, nature's carrying capacity is finite and we already caused several global problems like damaged ozone layer, climate change, and the overuse of other global common pool resources (rainforests, oceans). More than 20 years after the beginning of the discussions about sustainable development we are still unable to find an overall solution for the unsustainable environmental and social processes.

Current economies are growth-oriented based on the institutions of capitalism and most of us are waiting for the solution of today's problems from economic growth. But if growth is the problem itself, then it cannot handle these problems. Present capitalist economies are not capable of not growing because without economic growth they collapse and new problems emerge beside the aforementioned ones.

As an alternative, the theory of de-growth suggests that we should reconsider our goals and means. The actual growth-based economic system and its institutions should be restructured and new means should be used. The democratic and peaceful transition should help to move towards real sustainability.

Keywords: environmental crisis, social crisis, sustainability, capitalism, de-growth

1. Introduction

In the recent years the world has been facing an economic crisis. Still these days we can hear from many sources about the caused economic problems which are still un-

solved. Mainstream economists and politicians are waiting for the answer from economic growth.

We usually tend to forget that the current crisis has other two dimensions also – social and environmental – which started decades ago. What if growth is the problem itself of all the three dimensions of the crisis? Then we cannot wait for the answer from it.

The question is whether the present capitalist economies are capable of not growing or not. Currently it seems that they cannot. As an alternative, the theory of de-growth suggests that we should reconsider our means and ends. The actual growth-based economic system and its institutions should be restructured and new means should be used. The democratic and peaceful transition should help to move towards real sustainability.

In this paper first I introduce briefly the ecological and social dimensions of the crisis and point out that economic growth might be the problem itself. Then as another way, I introduce the alternative of de-growth and make an attempt to present its connection with capitalism.

2. The ecological crisis

Kenneth Boulding declares that ‘anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist’. We have been living on credit: according to the index of ecological footprint if everybody on Earth lived an American lifestyle we would need six planets (Latouche 2011).

Nature’s carrying capacity is finite and we already caused several global problems like damaged ozone layer, climate change, and the overuse of other global common pool resources. Global common pool resources – Antarctica, oceans, rainforests, Earth’s atmosphere and biological diversity – are in danger (Sachs 2005). The problem is that the price of natural resources is low and depositing the garbage is almost free. Specialization and commerce cause a decrease in agricultural diversity in traditional agro-societies. It seems that the environment mainly suffers from over-growth thus from over-use of the resources or from the over increment of human race, and not from the inefficient use of the resources. It is not enough to be more efficient as it causes just more use of the given resource – which we call as Jevons paradox – and then the situation is even worse. E.g. the number of cars is growing four times faster than the population of the Earth. Losing of ecological resistance potentially causes serious problems as the system will be less capable to hold up human existence and uncertainties are growing regarding the environmental effects of economic activity.

Many people are pushed to the periphery because of the expanding growth which causes drought, disappeared animals, fenced and ruined fields (Sachs 2007). Moreover these people have to show up in the urban markets where they have no purchase power, so poverty is all that remains. Hence, poverty is started to be correlated with the ruin of environment but we should not mix up cause and effect (Sachs 2005).

Latouche (2011) declares that growth is already not sustainable. Our economy has over-grown; people make waste from resources faster than nature produces resources again from trash. The worldwide ecological dept has increased from 70% to 120% from 1960 to 1999, and it is just rising as the lifetime of products is getting shorter and shorter (Arrow et al. 2005, Latouche 2011). Developed world continue to consume wastefully. 80% of the products on the market go to the dustbin after only one use which creates an annual 760 kg of household waste per person in the USA, while 40 kg paper based advertisement goes into the post-boxes. Currently developed countries produce all together 4 billion tons rubbish per year. The huge amount of freely or incorrectly deposited trash is poisonous and exceeds the ecological systems' natural anabolic capacity. It takes decades, centuries or more that these radioactive, PCB, CFC etc. materials state their effects causing diseases and global climate change. The losses are significant, irreversible and show asymmetric distribution in time. While revenues come in immediately, costs come up in the future (Spash 2005).

Goergescu-Roegen draws our attention that the law of entropy can be used in the analysis of economic processes. According to him it is important to take into account the biological, physical limitations of all economic activity, system or technology, and it is necessary to redefine what we call scarcity. In addition, we should take into account that the most of the processes of the economy is one-way, irreversible and indefinable from the aspect of society and environment, and the processes for the entire economy, – with today's word alive – the sustainability from social and environmental aspects. So economy should be treated as an opened system which interacts with its environment, and which uses low-entropy, valuable inputs, while the outputs are high-entropy and worthless. Hence, one of the targets should be the reduction of throughput (Pataki 2002a, 2002b).

3. The social crisis

Territorial and income inequalities are widening at all levels – global, national and regional – despite of the economic growth of the last decades. The poverty in the

world is huge; many people are not able to meet their basic needs – e.g. food, drinking water and healthcare.

When we are talking about social crisis we should mention not only the problems of the poorest people but the problems of the rich ones also. At this point it is important to take difference between material welfare and real well-being. While the previous concentrates on the material dimension, on affluence, the latter means an overall sense of comfort where income and consumption are just one of the components (Fitoussi et al. 2009). Living conditions, health, education, living environment, infrastructure, working hours, leisure time, social capital, personal relationships, democratic and citizens' possibilities, economic, political and environmental uncertainties, and subjective well-being should be taken into account also.

The growth in GDP of developed world and the multiplication of consumption per person do not cause necessarily an increasing proportion of well-being. In many cases the rising incomes do not involve decreasing working hours and increasing leisure time (Pataki–Takács–Sánta 2007). It would be necessarily to spend more time on other values, such as family and social relations. Thus, in addition that we excessively pollute our environment, it is not even certain that majority of the society feels itself good (Latouche 2011).

This is proved for example by the paradox of appropriation of consumption (Lindenberg 2005). Most of the ordinary commodities can be more or less expropriated. E.g. a family can use a bathroom in common but every member of it can have his/her own one. We can see the trend that the higher is one's income the more he/she appropriates his/her consumption. But what is so paradoxical in this phenomenon is that with the increasing expropriation people destroy certain forms of social appreciation which they cannot substitute own their own. If everything is totally expropriated e.g. in a family there is no need to share anything, and follow the norms of sharing, after a time the members of it will admit that they miss the 'good old times' when they were less rich but they were more important to each other. So as income is increasing sharing groups are shrinking. At the same time social norms, local traditions, ethnic specialties cannot be held up without them. Thus the personal ownership of a product or a service might cause pleasure in shorter term, but in longer term we pays heavily for it. So after meeting the basic needs, happiness depends on other qualitative factors influencing our lives, which are not necessarily correlated with wealth (Kallis et al. 2012).

Another proof is that the continuous redefinitions of social status holding up permanent tension in the society in global, national, regional and communal level too (Corrigan 2010, Csigó 2007). Usually the aim of our consumptions is not to break from the crowd but to reach a socially accepted honourable limit in quantity and quality as well (Veblen 1975). Do we really need these kind of situations, if yes,

in what extent, and how the enormous amount of promotion strengthen these processes, so they become unperceived a part of our lives.

Layard (2007) declares also that the determining factors of our happiness are rather our relationships with family and friends than our income. Our satisfaction of our income depends on how much the others earn, and what we are used to earn.

4. An alternative: the theory of de-growth

In section 2 and 3, I introduced the problem of continuous growth. As an alternative direction, the theory of de-growth appeared, introducing that the continuous growth is not desirable; moreover, in many cases it is specifically harmful.

4.1. The interpretations of de-growth

The meaning of the expression of de-growth can be defined from three different, mutually not exclusive aspects. From the first aspect it means a provocative slogan which message is that economic growth as the main social mean and end should be questioned, and we should get rid of the related usual mode of thinking (Latouche 2011).

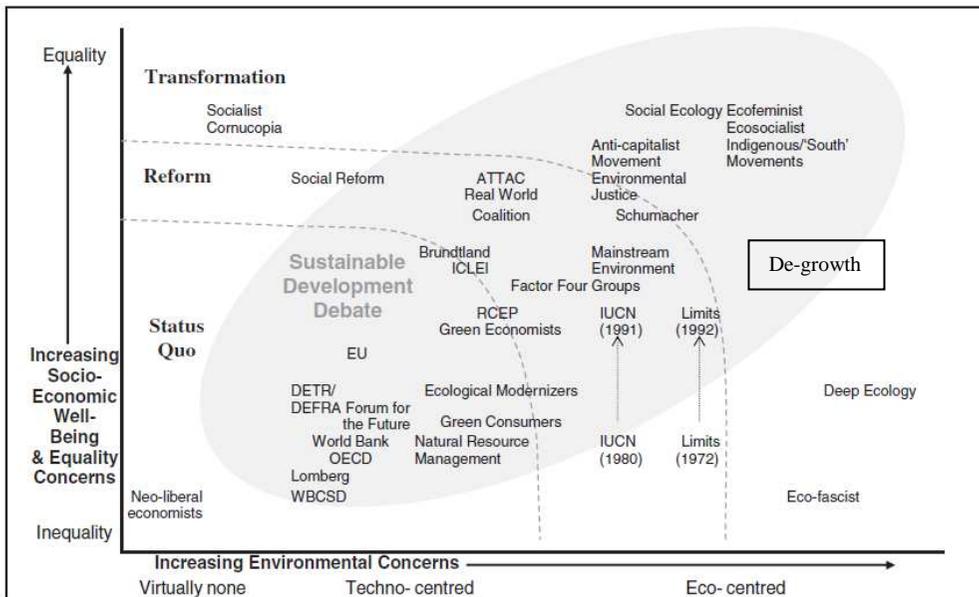
From the second aspect de-growth is a social movement; as the program of de-growth has become a scientific research field from a French civil movement which started in the early 2000s. In France a political party (Parti pour la Décroissance) is related to it, but it is not really decided whether it is closer to the right or the left side. Years later, this social and political ambition has become stronger; there are more and more countries where groups are organized along this principle, there are more and more related concrete alternative, and the scientific world organizes more and more conferences in this topic.

From the third aspect de-growth is a complex scientific theory which appeared as an alternative counterpoint of the challenges and tasks caused by continuous economic growth. The aim is a peaceful and democratic transition to a more equitable society and a more livable environment (Latouche 2011, Martínez-Alier et al. 2010). Today's mainstream economics accepts that permanent growth is desirable, whereas de-growth might provide a completely new paradigm. Today, everything and everyone – individuals, companies and institutions – operate along the same principle that growth is desirable. If growth rate reduces or stops – for example during recessions – it causes serious problems. The growth-oriented capitalist economies are unprepared for how to de-grow, during these times, as Kallis et al. (2012) write they collapse. That is, the GDP reduces, the unemployment rate increases, the currency weakens, the investments are uncertain, the public debt rises, the propor-

tion of emigrants increases, etc. Therefore the theory suggests the overall restructuring of the current growth-oriented economic system, but not de-growth in the present system (Latouche 2011). We should move on the dominant discourse, and we should get rid of the pressure of growth. The main objective of the transformation is a social and economic system where bigger well-being could be reached without the continuous growth in production and consumption, and where the environmental pressure would be significantly reduced.

Latouche (2011) hopes that the possible outcomes of the whole de-growth program would include the following: protection of the environment, greater well-being, less unemployment, less stress, more transparent production chains, reduction of dependency from multinational companies, increasing security in all aspects, strengthening democratic attitudes and participation in decision-making, opportunities for the Third World. The implementation could be started first in the field of food supply, and later it could be extended to a broader economic and financial self-sustainability also (Latouche 2011).

Figure 1. Mapping of views on sustainable development



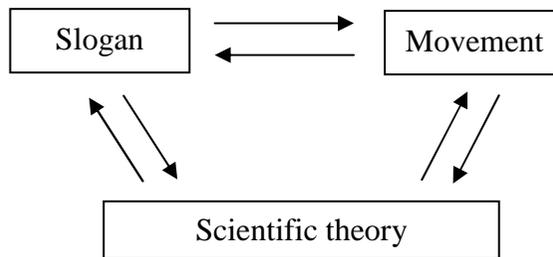
Source: Own construction based on Hopwood et al. (2005)

Hopwood et al. (2005) figure summarizes a set of theories about sustainable development. On the vertical axis we see how important a theory considers well-

being and social equity, while on the horizontal axis how much a theory focuses on environment. The figure shows a third dimension that what kind of changes a theory considers necessary: status quo, reformist or transformative. If we place the theory of de-growth in this figure, it would be in the upper right-range, in the transformative category. De-growth is probably more sensitive towards the environmental problems than towards social problems.

The three approaches of de-growth cannot be sharply separated, since they continuously interact with each other, thereby they repeatedly fertilizes the thoughts related to the topic. This process is illustrated by Figure 2.

Figure 2. The relationships of the approaches of de-growth



Source: Own construction

Although the three interpretations cannot be clearly distinguished, the rest of the paper primarily deals with the approach of scientific theory, but of course the theory is closely related to movements which can also be considered means. After introducing shortly some means on different levels the paper focuses on the connection of de-growth with capitalism.

4.2. The levels and means of de-growth

The changes following the principles of de-growth has already been started. Several attempts, means can be experienced which are certainly waiting to be improved, but a process has begun. For example, in Spain several initiatives have been started (Amate et al. 2013, Cattaneo–Gavalda 2010). The steps for the implementation of the ideas of the movements can be grouped into four main categories, depending on which level of the society is affected. This is the point where scientific theories and movements continuously interact with each other, so there is no strict boundary between the two aspects.

On the individual level the program can be described as a lifestyle, a form of life where the participant voluntarily take on simplicity and a sustainable mode of life which can be as a form of symbolic consumption and which does not mean asceticism, nor that from now he/she cannot has beautiful dresses, low-energy tools, cannot go for calm and relaxing holidays and cannot eat delicious foods (Málovics–Prónay 2008, Kallis et al. 2012). As Veblen (1975) stated also the aim of a significant portion of our consumption is ostentation and status-gaining which might be one of the keys to the global ecological crisis (Flipo 2008). Thus citizens of the Western civilization have to sober urgency, starting with the richest ones' responsibility. The program does not mean retrogression or setting back an earlier era of history but the realization of the principle "better from less" (Matthey 2010).

Thinkers of de-growth strongly believe in bottom-up initiatives, so in the community level. It is important to rethink the redistribution and the recycling of goods organized from the bottom (Schneider 2008). It is worth to look back, learn from former societies – natural tribes, hunter-gatherer societies – in order to be able to respect more each other and the nature (Gowdy 2007). Innovative models of local life are needed (Kallis et al. 2012). New means can be: the model of cohousing, local currencies, localized production and supply systems, self-sufficient organizations, small-scale sustainable agricultural production, new forms of coexistence, community gardens, etc. (Liegey et al. 2013, Lietaert 2010, Longhurst–Seyfang 2013). Every kind of attempt for new models of production and consumption which would serve the aims of de-growth should be supported.

Means are needed on national level as bottom up strategies cannot be efficient without top-down actions (van den Bergh 2011). Despite many scientists have criticized the indicator of GDP, governments on the national level intend to increase it – this is called as the paradox of GDP. So beside a fundamental change in the attitudes, adequate information-transfer is required from science to society, education and the media, and opened public discussions are necessary for the acceptance of the conceptions. At these higher levels of governance, it would be important to recognize and admit the financial, physical, natural, infrastructural and time limitations, and national and international strategies should be developed in accordance with them (Schneider 2008). According to the scientific literature basic income is considered a very important mean which can be connected mostly to the national level, but it can be connected even to the communal level also. Launching basic income could help on poverty, unemployment, uncertainty and even on those who always work over (Mylondo 2008).

On the international level multilateral agreements and relevant Community policies are needed to be successful (van den Bergh 2011). Many pollutants – such as greenhouse gases – cause global problems which cannot be handled by only one

country. On international level we should take differences which countries have to de-grow. Of course, in a certain scale and type, so called selective growth is needed in the southern countries (Foster 2011, Kallis et al. 2012, van den Bergh 2011). In many societies the basic needs – drinking water, food, healthcare – are not met. Therefore the de-growth expectations (reduction in consumption and production) towards the western countries cannot be applied to them, but instead a new sustainable development path should be worked out which does not lead to the same impasse as the path of western societies.

5. De-growth and capitalism

The common vision of de-growth researchers that economy should get in a kind of state which can be considered sustainable socially and environmentally too. So the program is not an aim, but primarily a process which appoint the way for it. In order to really start this process it is necessary to identify the institutional and technological limitations that are currently inhibit this way (Griethuysen 2010).

First, one of the pillars of the capitalist model of development, the institution of property should be examined. Two main potentials of the property can be defined. One is the potential of possession which provides the right to have a say in a matter, and a variety of other rights. The other is the potential of the propriety itself, which gives the possibility of getting and giving credit. The latter allows the actors of the economy to extend his/her economic activity or invest in new ones which is a cumulative process as more property and status can be acquired (Griethuysen 2010). However, this process does not only allow growth, but also forces it since the credits with their interests have to be paid back on time. At this point the problems are connected to monetary system's problems. Those debtors who are unable to pay their credit back on time are selected out of the property-based economy. Creditors give the impulse for further expansion of the capitalist economic system by choosing the activities to be financed, so innovations are profit-driven. In this process the ecological and social aspects are effaced thus it is difficult to imagine "win-win" strategies, so social differences are widening, social hierarchy is strengthening. This process is path-dependent which implies this development path where there is no internal limitation and which seems to lock in because it cannot handle the caused problems. The limitation should arrive from outside, we should intervene in this process and redefine the legal limits of the economic system (Griethuysen 2010). During the transition very low or zero interest rates should be considered (Kallis et al. 2012).

According to the previous thoughts an eco-compatible capitalist system in practice does not seem realistic (Foster 2011). But the main cause of environmental

degradation is economic growth, and the capacity of the environment cannot be increased, and the environment cannot be substituted perfectly, which is called as strong sustainability theory. A de-accumulation process should be started stopping the concentration of capital without limitations which strengthens a kind of modern caste system. However in such a process the questions of succession should be handled with special care.

According to Lawn (2011) the capitalist system mainly depends on its institutional framework which supports and forms it, thus many kind of the system can be imagined. By re-planning it a green, dematerialized capitalism can be developed which can support the steady-state level.

6. Discussion

The present crisis which is a triple crisis – so not only economic but social and environmental also – might help us to take ourselves some basic questions like ‘Where we are?’, ‘How did we get here?’ and ‘Where are we going?’ (Kallis et al. 2010). Everyone should have the right to live a good, enjoyable, qualitative life on intra-generational and inter-generational level also. The current growth-oriented world rather threatens it that give appropriate conditions and framework for it. Although social classes, differences have always been, and probably there always will be, the extent of the difference should not be ignored.

It is a question that where and in which direction the theory of de-growth will change. There is many coercive forces that changes have to be made on the current system. However, to be able to start the process, politics, social attitudes, institutions and actually everything should work for the new aims, so that the theory would be widely accepted and would put in practice. We need to find the democracy of de-growth. Johannisova–Wolf (2012) economic democracy might be good for describing it: ‘a system of checks and balances on economic power and support for the right of citizens to actively participate in the economy regardless of social status, race, gender, etc.’

If we cannot change the current economic and social system, everyone – individuals and companies – has an interest in growth which is a treadmill where there is no exit. This process – the coercion of growth – can be described by theory of ‘treadmill of production’ (Gould et al. 2003). Another big question is that if the aims of de-growth can be achieved within the framework of capitalism, as capitalism is about agglomeration from its definition, a social system where private property and market transactions dominates (Kallis et al. 2012, Trainer 2012).

De-growth does not have only one, perfectly defensible definition, currently it is not a specific, single alternative but a matrix of various alternatives which opens a space for creativity raising the heavy blanket of the present economic system (Latouche 2010). De-growth is a complex method of treatment which aims to take into account economic, financial, social, environmental, cultural and civilizational aspects.

The different notions of de-growth agrees that in order to achieve a better future – from the aspect of society and environment also – this program or a similar must play the key role, and many people thinks this process seems inevitable. It is important to note that as our problems are serious and difficult to solve, the mainstream economics should also consider it. The solution is probably the result of the variation of many ideas which tolerate and understand each other. As Martínez-Alier et al. (2010) wrote we must ask the question that would we like to follow the business as usual which promise less and less good for future, or would we like to work on a currently utopian but livable system? After all, the current growth seems unrealistic in the long run (Kallis et al. 2012).

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