

5. The Economic Program of De-growth and a Possible Connection with Capability Approach

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The program of de-growth which mainly belongs to Serge Latouche strengthened in the recent years as an alternative answer to our global economic, social and environmental problems. The agents of the theory highlight that everybody on Earth, especially the North – USA, Europe, etc. – should reconsider their values to be followed and review all the problems caused by continuous growth. Lists of social and environmental reasons – like growing poverty and the nature’s finite carrying capacity – show that this growing pace cannot be sustained.

This alternative suggests that the ‘developed world’ should decrease its ecological footprint and focus on real well-being and justice. We work and consume too much and it seems that our happiness does not mainly depend on these factors. We should look back¹; learn from former societies to be able to honour nature and each other too. Certainly it would not mean the level of ascetics but society itself should determine what should be called enough. At this point the role of local level is getting valorized.

Amartya Sen’s capability approach shows similarities with the program of de-growth. They both concentrate on serious moral questions and attempt to redefine well-being. Hence it is worth to compare the two theories, and show some points where they might learn from each other.

Keywords: de-growth, capability approach, well-being, protection of environment

1. Introduction

Nowadays we can hear from many sources that we have more and more serious environmental and social problems on our planet. As an answer, an alternative direction – the program of de-growth – appeared, that the continuous growth is not desirable. I introduce environmental and social reasons why it is necessary to stop growth, then shortly reasons why the mainstream still would like to grow. As another way, I highlight the main points of the de-growth program and make an attempt to find a possible connection with Amartya Sen’s capability approach.

¹ Present paper is supported by the European Union and co-funded by the European Social Fund. Project title: “Broadening the knowledge base and supporting the long term professional sustainability of the Research University Centre of Excellence at the University of Szeged by ensuring the rising generation of excellent scientists.” Project number: TÁMOP-4.2.2/B-10/1-2010-0012

2. Why is it necessary to stop growth?

We – economists – study and teach that a given activity is worth to do if its gained incomings are bigger than its costs and expenditures. So – as Serge Latouche (2011) and Herman Daly (2005) say – why is it not so obvious that if this kind of basic thesis has not been true on global level for several decades, we should stop growth? In microeconomics a given activity is optimal in case marginal revenue is equal to marginal cost. Then it is not worth to do it additionally. When analyses switch to macroeconomics these notions disappear and none speaks about optimal quantities, costs and benefits, and ‘when to stop’-rules.

Western civilization has a lot of unsolved problems and nowadays’ ongoing recession just reinforces this statement. One part of the world is eating too much which causes various diseases, while the other part is starving. One part produces consciously a huge amount of various kind of garbage while the other – defenseless – part gets it. Latouche (2011) asks questions like: Where did we – ‘civilized people’ – come from and where do we go, what is our goal? We have been living on credit: if everybody on Earth lived an American lifestyle we would need six planets. Do we really think that we can grow endlessly in a finite world?

For thousands of years people were fighting against the nature’s forces. In the recent centuries – especially in the recent decades – it seemed that humanity won more and more battle. Today we know that this aim hides inside the destruction of the environment and we are part of the environment, not outsiders. We have more and more power and we show more and more irresponsibility to destroy ourselves. Furthermore Hankiss Elemér (1997) draws our attention that surprisingly we usually destroy our society which we created for our own safe, and allow ourselves poverty, brutality and fear. What should happen that we really consider our problems?

We have to repose the discussion onto new bases. We should make the difference between objectives and methods, and identify the real problem. Latouche (2011) declares that growth is already not sustainable. What we produce and consume cannot be more than the biosphere’s supporting capability. Developing new technologies and production methods follow the same logic as before; that ‘growth is desirable’. Probably this is not a good method and the aim is wrong. As a consequence, we have to reduce our wasteful consumption. 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 only, while 40 kg paper based advertisement goes into the post-boxes. Currently developed countries produce all together 4 billion tons rubbish per year.

Wolfgang Sachs (2005) has a good example to demonstrate the problem. In modern cities, down in the metro stations there are advertising posters. As we recognized the paper-waste, new – so called environmentally friendly – technologies arrived, and by now we can see the advertisements mostly on monitors in video-form. Thus we have the solution for the paper-problem. The discourse about development is deeply full of western convictions like progress, growth or consumption but these might be the problem itself and they distract the attention from our relationship with environment.

In 1949 Harry Truman was the first who characterized the poor countries, the Third World as under-developed territory despite of all their diversity. He explained the leading role of the North – especially the USA – as everybody is going in the same direction. In this sense the South became a competitor, and the North forced them into a treadmill no matter that their intellectuality, culture and tradition are just the opposite. Contrary to all expectations by the 21st century, after fifty years this divide is just deeper (Sachs 2005).

Latouche (2011) emphasizes that we should get rid of the pressure of growth and focus only on real sustainability and real well-being. For most of us work, growth is not an option; the present economic and social structure is forcing us into it. The continuous purchasing makes us feel the illusion of having achieved something meaningful in life. Apparently we have forgotten what kind of values we are following, what is important for us, what can make us happy and satisfied in our lives.

2.1. The social reasons

Unfortunately in the modern society if someone wants to be famous and respectable in many cases he/she has to expend needlessly and be wasteful. Nowadays those consumptions which are necessary just for life do not represent value but at the same time they do not serve well-being. As Thorstein Veblen (1975) describes usually the aim of these consumptions is not to break from the crowd but to reach a socially accepted honourable limit in quantity and quality as well. This limit is not strict standard but very elastic and can be raised infinitely, or cannot?

As we see ‘the more a man can dispense the richer he/she is’ attitude in the 19th started to disappear and today it seems so absurd (Pataki et al. 2007). A new myth started to spread in the Euro-American civilization saying that we can be happier and more satisfied with more and more material goods despite of all religious and scientific convictions. For example in the USA in the ‘80s one-third of the citizens considered himself/herself happy, exactly the same

proportion as thirty years before although the consumption per person doubled in this period. This means that our happiness depends on other factors such as the quality of human relationships and the scale of relative consumption comparing to others in the society. According to another survey people in countries with very different income-levels (e.g. Japan and Nigeria) feel themselves equally happy. So we always compare our material situation to the other members of the society.

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. Siegwart Lindenberg's (2005) model says that 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.

It seems that the utilitarian approach – that says widening consumption opportunities raise total utility – cannot explain that the measure of the individual, subjective feeling of well-being did not grow in the last decades in the developed countries (Corrigan 2010, Csígó 2007). If we accept the 'homo oeconomicus' image of man we can only say that people's needs are simply fulfilled. If it's true why do people aspire after bigger cars, houses, etc.? Is it so hard to confess the role of the outside pressure in case of our preferences coming from deep inside? Modern man from a developed country follows all these status-gaining opportunities while in the long run he pays with other sources of well-being: time for more valuable activities, social relations, friends, family and love. Consequently commodities and different social classes are just weapons in this never ending fight. We can create infinite definitions and redefinitions of social status holding up a permanent tension in the society in local, regional, national and international level too.

Beside the social consumption-increasing mechanisms economic ones are also working like advertisements and packaging technologies (Gowdy 2007, Pataki et al. 2007). So the essence is that the determinant part of our shopping claim was not born with us but is a generated one. The continuous getting-fever is probably not a basic characteristic of human nature. Many hunter-gatherer, natural tribes prove this statement. We can and should learn

from former societies. Usually we can see different paintings, pictures about these people portrayed as primitive wilds fighting for their everyday survival but this is what a modern man thinks, not the exact truth. These ancient communities spent much more time for resting, social life, games; they had much more individual freedom as today's man – so they lived a life what now we call well-being. It was obvious to live a peaceful and harmonic life with nature. They did not know social classes and discrimination. It seems that 'homo oeconomicus' with its competition-spirit and rational calculating does not describe the real human nature; it might be just a myth. Although deep inside all of us believe or would like to believe that we are so rational and make consistent decisions, so this kind of human image is like a fiction and it might be just like a religion.

In addition we also explain the present economic structure, the resource-use, the asset- and income-distribution ideologies (Gowdy 2007). The final goal is to be Pareto-efficient; everybody gets revenues according to his/her marginal productivity, no matter if the system is not equitable. In nature tribes social norms controlled that meat has to be equally shared among each members. They did not save any food until anybody is hungry, they did not really care about private possession. So it is not only the market which can produce and distribute goods and services. These hunter-gatherer communities were well-fed, ecologically sustainable, lived an entire life socially and intellectually, tried for equality and had a lot of spare time. Some of them are still alive and operate in this way e.g. in Africa, Australia, Tanzania and North-Canada in spite of they do not live in the friendliest part of our planet. Thus actually we can call them just as rational as ourselves. These societies apply the 'immediate-return' principle which means they live from one day to another; they do not have tools and technologies for storing food. 'Delayed-return' and holding are modern methods, and today we cannot image how to live successfully in another way.

We certainly do not know a lot about these communities and I do not want to over-idealize them but as I mentioned before we can and should learn from them, and think over the principles of living. Economic scarcity is the conception of modern society, and not the obligate attachment of human life, it depends on the generated needs. Work and social life do not have to be separated; people are not robots who are waiting for some for spare-time to live a real life. Individual well-being in connection with individual production is not necessary; members do not have to starve. Relationship with the nature can be co-ordinated where there is no owner and possession. Stock means only shared knowledge, flows are sustainable and enough for well-being. Inequality, sexual discrimination and social insecurity are not natural.

To sum up, human beings are political and social creatures by their nature; not isolated individuals (Fukuyama 2000). People are originally capable for cooperation, altruism and creating social capital. These characteristics are very likely the biggest strengths of human race.

2.2. The environmental reasons

Wolfgang Sachs (2007) declares that even if we admit or not, we approximate the limits of growth even if we have already reached it and now we are just going down. Some of us think that growing can be the solution for our problems by opening new markets for ecologically friendly technologies, some of us think that that is the problem itself. Some of us would like to excuse the North – mainly the USA and Europe – and show that the solution can only come from new northern technologies, some of us would like the North to reconsider its responsibility.

Actually the environment mainly suffers from over-growth and not from the inefficient use of resources or from the over-increment of human race. The structure of growth hinders communities, well-being and destroy environment. In this sense ‘sustainable development’ is an oxymoron. Sachs (2007) advises that we should ask ourselves the questions: ‘What kind of and whose needs?’; ‘What is enough?’ Those who are pushed to the periphery because of the expanding ‘development’ – which caused drought, disappeared animals, fenced and ruined fields – have to show up in the urban markets where they have no purchase power, so poverty is all that remains. Hence – in this sense – northern countries are the ones who have to slow down and withdraw as they have much bigger ecological footprint than their territory. According to certain signs many industrial societies overpassed the limits in the ‘70s from where the increasing GNP did not really raise the standards of living which could mean that an optionally decrease in production might not end up in the decline in well-being.

We cannot say that we were not aware of the problem. In 1962 the book of *Silent Spring* written by Rachel Carson warned everybody and strengthened environmental protection movements (Sachs 2005). We started to consider the interests of future generations that they also should be able to reach the same level as we do. So again, actually the aim is still not to keep the honour of the nature but the expansion of the present for the future thinking about how to substitute natural capital. Moreover poverty is started to be correlated with the ruin of environment but we should not mix up cause and effect. Protection is not only a management task. Global common goods – Antarctica, oceans, rainforests, Earth’s atmosphere and

biological diversity – are especially in danger. 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; and many principles do not serve the protection of natural resources. At this point the role of scientists is getting valorized as the barriers can be proved only by scientific results. We should minimize the nature uses per unit of economic output and start a diet to reduce our excess weight. 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. The number of cars is growing four times faster as the population of the Earth. As Herman Daly (2005) says if a freighter sink because of too much cargo, for us there will be no consolation if it sinks optimally.

Classically consumption can be split into two main types: final and intermediate one. Intermediate consumption means products and services which are used for production. As human beings are also resources with their labor force Inge Ropke (2005) takes the question if there is any final consumption. As people need to eat, rest, study, etc. to be capable for work we can say that these consumptions are also intermediate ones. But we still intuitively stick to the notion of final ones, as a significant group of people have much higher standard of living than what basic needs would require. The problem is that there are vainly ecologically more efficient solutions if the growing consumption cancels them – which we call as rebound effect.

There is a huge amount of freely or incorrectly deposited trash which 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. Clive Spash (2005) draws our attention that positive time preference and net present value at individual level face problems in long term social decisions as future generations' preferences are not included. In this sense inter-generational discount rate and inter-temporal one should not be the same.

Natural carrying capacity is not a static, easily determinable value (Arrow et al. 2005, Latouche 2011). It depends on technologies, preferences, the structure of production and consumption, the variable interactions of physical and biotic environment. It would be senseless to give only one number of it but an overall index would be useful which shows the current measure of economy and its intensity comparing to the biosphere. Losing of ecological resistance potentially causes serious problems as the system will be less capable to hold up human existence, irreversible changes in choice opportunities, growing uncertainties

regarding the environmental effects of economic activity. Our economy has over-grown; people make waste from resources faster than nature produces resources again from trash. The worldwide ecological debt 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.

To sum up, in simple words something is sustainable if it can be held up in the future which depends on economical, social – including cultural, ethical viewpoints – and ecological factors. Today more and more people agree that growth is ecologically not sustainable, and it seems that neither it is socially. Thus politics in the North have to change the focus from growth to real sustainability and in the South to fair development. It is important to recognize that we should handle differently the notion of growth and development. Hence sustainable development can have a deeper, human, social, ethical, cultural, ecological and institutional meaning (Ekins 2005).

3. Why certain groups like growth?

According to mainstream beliefs every economic activity is predominantly useful, and GDP is a kind of economic quantity which can grow forever (Daly 2005). The main goal is to maximize well-being but it seems that this function has no upperbound so there is no optimal size of economy. Everything can grow and as a consequence, well-being can always be bigger. Technology might be the only barrier of growth but as technologic development supposedly has no limits, growth has neither as substitution is solvable in this way. In this sense environment and eco-system is just a sub-system of economy. Although neoclassical paradigm let forever growth, but does not require it. But it became the common salve for the problems like overpopulation, unfair distribution, inevitable unemployment and environmental pollution also.

Conventional, mainstream theories support capitalism as the best kind of structure which can ever exist and which is natural, inevitable and fit to human nature (Hartwick et al. 2009, Latouche 2011). These theories emphasize growth as they see it as economic development. From this point of view all of these theories – classical, neoclassical, Keynesianism, neoliberal, etc. – work on the same logic. Nonconventional theories – like Marxism, socialism and other radical ones – criticize capitalist structure as it can be ethically questioned but the aim stayed the same: growth. Of course their terminologies are different but from the aspects of goals they are hardly diverse.

Nevertheless it seems that people tend to mix up the notion of growth and development. These notions might have common sections but we should separate them too (Hartwick et al. 2009). The result of development is that everybody has a better and better life, and according to famous paradigms growth is just a method for this aim. Ere now, none proved universally that it is currently the best solution and it really serves the goal. Growth means achieving more and more massive economy and aggregating means taking together everything. If these kinds of indicators are increasing it means that all together everybody is in a better situation. But it is forgotten that they do not handle inequality, injustice, poverty and widening income and territorial differences. Consequently development does not really need growth but rather conditions which are responsible for production's input and output which help the world to be better as a complex – naturally, socially, economically, culturally, politically etc..

4. The way of de-growth

The program of de-growth mainly belongs to Serge Latouche (2011) who says that we can agree that the common aim is well-being. That is another question how we define it but we know several facts. Some of them say that it seems that constantly growing GDP especially in the western civilization does not end up in a bigger proportion of more satisfied and happier citizens as for one reason everybody compares himself/herself to the current social structure, but of course we cannot exclude entirely the importance of GDP (Fitoussi et al. 2009). As technology's marginal productivity is increasing labor's decreasing which causes unemployment especially among less qualified labor force. Plus there is the paradox that in the North it does not cause less working hours and more spare time only much revenue. Hence consumption is larger and larger too while it pollutes environment. Taken everything into account humanity should think over the followed values, produce and consume less or at least stop at this level. If everybody worked less, unemployment and pollution would also reduce, spare time would increase, human relationships could be looked after better. We usually forgot that we do not live to work but to work to live.

De-growth is a slogan for a totally different logic to shake up everyone from the charm of growth and put economics back to its pure agent, to the biosphere. E.g. according to a survey 90% of the American companies admit that a new product could not be sold without marketing campaign, 85% agree that in most cases advertisements convince people to buy totally unnecessary products, and 51% state that advertisements persuade consumers to buy

the kind of products that they do not want in fact; and the result is just more and more waste. E.g. 500 ships take the water monthly with electronic waste towards Nigeria without any health standards. Society itself should tell where the sufficient and acceptable measure of consumption is; what should be called enough.

The real problem is not over-population but whether we are capable to distribute the available resources equally. The concrete utopia of de-growth – as Latouche (2011) calls it – cannot be managed without cultural revolution and without redefining the whole political life. The program suggests eight coherent, key factors – called as the eight R's angelic circuit – to build the new society: reevaluate, re-conceptualize, restructure, redistribute, re-localize, reduce, reuse and recycle. I summarize shortly the meaning of the R's:

- Reevaluate: highlight and follow the value of justice, responsibility, solidarity, intellectual life and the respect of democracy.
- Re-conceptualize: redefine e.g. poverty and richness, scarcity and abundance.
- Restructure: production and social relationships should follow the changes in value but it is a big question if it can be achieved within the frame of capitalism.
- Redistribute: the access to goods and natural heritage on global, social and intergenerational level also.
- Re-localize: It has a special role with the slogan of 'Think globally, act locally!'. Local needs should be fulfilled from local production, and we should focus on local culture and local politics. An ecological society should be built from smaller territories, bioregions which are in harmony with the ecological system and strive for reducing negative externalities and energy consumption. In this case small does not necessarily mean physically but rather an identity where members would like to take care of the local essence and spirit. There are promising initiatives like 'new communities' network' in Italy.
- Reduce: production, consumption, risks, working hours, transportation.
- Reuse, recycle: longer product lives, environmentally friendly technologies.

First of all the program could be implemented in the field of food-supply, and later economic and financial self-sufficiency. To sum up, regionalization means less transportation and producing consumption, transparent production chain, inspiration for sustainable production and consumption with the reformation of taxation system and with a new direction of technological innovations and scientific research goals, the reduction of dependence from multinational companies and flow of capital, increasing safety in all sense, so briefly the

resettlement of economy to the local communities. As a result, it would defend the environment as the found of any economic activity, decrease unemployment, strengthen involvement, integration and solidarity, bring forth more democratic economic attitude, open opportunities for developing countries and Third World, reduce working hours, stress and ameliorate population's health status. So the program of de-growth would not mean retrogression, poverty and abjection, but better from less.

Africa can have a special role as they do not have to reduce their ecological footprint which does not mean that growth-based society should be built there but rather they can avoid the impasse of growth. Maybe the South should take the first step in another direction and resist intellectual colonization. We cannot solve the problem of poverty by growth as poverty is caused by growth.

5. De-growth and capability approach

Capability approach is linked to Amartya Sen who got the Nobel-prize in 1998 and has a great effect on science economics today too. Sen (2003) defines the process of development whereby those freedoms broaden which people actually enjoy. This approach is up against the closer interpretation of development which determines it as the increase of GDP and personal incomes, industrialization, technological progress or modernization of society.

By development the sources of lack of freedom should be terminated like poverty, oppression, intolerance and abuse. The different forms of freedom are both means and objectives too. Briefly Sen (2003) examines five main types of freedom: political, economic, social, transparency guarantees and livelihood safety. The means can be changed to functionings – valuable doings and beings – which are the set of capabilities. As a result people can live a life which they can consider valuable with good reason. So the focus should be switched from utility, income and assets to another concept of well-being.

Although Sen (2003) is not directly against growth and modern capitalist markets, there are many common points with the program of de-growth as he says growth in itself does not legitimize anything. So first of all Sen (2003) writes about development consistently and not about growth. Both theory concentrates on real well-being, what good is for man, which cannot be measured with aggregate indicators like GDP, the picture should be tinted and values should be re-considered. They point out serious problems in modern world like poverty, starvation, diseases and health problems.

The main difference between the two theories that the program of de-growth is a transformative theory. It would like to restructure the current system and reach well-being without growth in production and consumption. On the other hand capability approach stays in the present economic structure and says that we should look in another direction and redefine well-being.

While utilitarian approach focuses on the equality of income (GDP) parallel with individual happiness, Sen (2003) highlights the equality of capabilities. De-growth's aim is 'good life' also but the question of justice is still opened (Muraca 2012, Sen 2003)

Table 1 Similarities and differences of the de-growth program and the capability approach

	De-growth program	Capability approach
Main focus	Transformative theory, well-being without growth in production and consumption	Redefining well-being
Main problems	Destruction of nature, poverty, injustice	Poverty, health problems, injustice
Responsible for problems	The North	Not specified
Measure of	The criticism of utilitarian measures of welfare	
Means	Restructure the current system and de-growth	Widening capabilities
Equality of	Not specified	Capabilities
Participation in decisions	The importance of local level	
The role of technology	The problem itself / Technological regime change is needed	Not specified

Source: author's own construction

The solutions show similarities as de-growth and capability approach emphasize the importance of participation in decision-making, and the role of local level too. Sen (2003) does not nominate certain capabilities which should be widened – although Martha Nussbaum does – and in line with this de-growth entrust the determination of limits to local societies, but names – not in exact order – values to be followed. Technology should also change the focus. Although Sen (2003) does not specify the role of technology, there are some researches which say that it should be developed to improve capabilities (Oosterlaken 2009). For the program of de-growth technology is mainly the problem itself – this is a pessimistic view – but the optimistic view says a technological regime-change is needed. Sen (2003) does not nominate who is responsible for problems, while Latouche (2011) considers the North (USA, Europe, Australia, etc.) is. Capability approach concentrates mainly on social problems, but de-growth

focuses on the entire Earth, maybe first to the nature, then or parallelly to society. However both theories centre serious moral questions.

Table 1. summarizes the comparison of the theories. Maybe in the future it would be more effective to think and then act along both theories to solve our problems while modernity might be exceeded.

Finally I would like to take some shy suggestion what could learn the two theories from each other. Capability approach should be more sensitive to environmental problems, identify more precisely the role of technology and identify the stakeholders, so who is responsible for the problems and who should start to act. The program of de-growth should make more elaborate concepts on welfare and its measurement.

6. Conclusion

What is sure is that our world has too many stressful unsolved problems which we cannot overlook. We can argue about if it is possible to handle the situation within the frame of capitalism. We would force open doors with the criticism of capitalism; Marx did it once already but without the criticism of growth and taking the ecological coercive forces into account. It seems that we should exceed modernity. Of course there are so many unanswered questions how to achieve the goals peacefully but we should not wait too much and dandle ourselves in dreams that everything is fine and we cannot follow other logics with intelligence and moral sense, and build better systems for ourselves – as Latouche (2011) says – with artistry.

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