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Vers une société d'abondance frugale: Contresens et controverses sur la décroissance

(Towards a Society of Frugal Abundance: Misinterpretations and Controversies about De-Growth)

by **Serge Latouche**

Mille et une Nuits, 2011.

In the early 1970s, at a time when the Keynesian welfare regimes were passing through a time of severe crisis, the newly emerging policies of growth and development that were leading the charge of global industrial, commercial and financial expansion were turning the attention of social scientists to the problems of growth and development. Since then, de-growth theory has garnered a great deal of attention among sociologists and political economists who have begun to consider the detrimental effects of the unlimited growth ideology on the development of societies. However, de-growth theory has been subjected to various criticisms, both from within and from outside. The perspective of Serge Latouche, noted for his path-breaking contributions to de-growth as a theory and political strategy that develops a particular critique of capitalism and capitalist ideology of endless and unlimited growth, is of particular note in this regard. In his 2011 book *Vers une société d'abondance frugale: Contresens et controverses sur la décroissance*, Latouche clarifies de-growth conceptually and theoretically, and explains its policy implications *vis-à-vis* the misunderstandings, debates and criticisms both in academic literature and current politics. Other than a small part of the book that was translated into English by a group of students of Sorbonne University*, no English translation had been made of the book. In contrast, readers in Turkey now have the chance to peruse the book through Tahir Karakaş's competent and attentive Turkish translation, including a helpful introductory preface explaining the conceptual and theoretical content of de-growth, and detailing Latouche's previous works and general theory. With this review, I introduce this concise book to the English-speaking world and the quick and precise description and insight into de-growth that it provides. The book is organized in two parts. The first part, entitled "Erroneous Interpretations" is

* The text can be accessed at <http://simplicityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/FrugalAbundance1SimplicityInstitute.pdf>.

devoted to the elimination of misconceptions and misunderstandings, while the second part, “Discussions”, highlights the practical applications and political attitudes of de-growth in terms of economic policy.

Décroissance (in French) or de-growth is a project of an ecological community that envisions nature-friendly economic development, structures and cultural formations, along with a corresponding political system, to counter the unlimited growth required for endless capital accumulation. Latouche characterizes this community as a “society of frugal abundance”, claiming that the “voluntary frugality” of individuals is a social virtue that serves as the foundations of a society of de-growth. The ultimate goal in this regard is the creation of an alternative welfare system in which abundance is not dependent on the growth economy, and in which the forceful and external imposition of such saving practices as austerity policies, and the techno-bureaucratic and techno-scientific governance that characterized also post-war developmentalism under Keynesian policies, is shunned.

Latouche defines the de-growth approach not only as an economic policy, but also as an economic logic and culture that is based on an ecological value system. As such, it can be considered a permanent value-based critique of the capitalist market system that demands the continuation of the endless and unlimited growth regime at the expense of nature and peaceful society. In this sense, Latouche’s critique can be considered, first of all, as an “axiological” critique of capitalism, as translator Karakaş puts it (Serge Latouche 2018, translated by Tahir Karakaş p. 17). In other words, de-growth not only seeks to break away from the policies of the growth economy, but also seeks to discard the entire social value system that shapes the logic of unlimited growth. In this respect, as a social virtue and value, de-growth is an axiological (value-based) and ecological political-economy theory that seeks to find ways to kick off the decline of capitalist growth and development economics. De-growth targets a different economy, society and political system, in short, “another world” (p. 168), and can be seen as a strategy for “the revaluation of all values”, or “transvaluation”, as Nietzsche would put it.

Since the 2008 crisis, societies and states have been trapped between two interwoven fundamentalist policies, being growth-obsession and austerity policies, that is, expansionary fiscal consolidation. The importance of Latouche’s book lies in its claim that post-crisis states and societies do not have to be condemned by these two neoliberal policies. In the face of the damaging effects of pro-growth and extensive fiscal consolidation policies on nature, the economy, democratic politics and culture (especially local solidarity networks), de-growth, for Latouche, is a necessary economic model with a feasible value system. In this value system of de-growth, externally imposed saving is replaced by voluntary “self-restriction” (p. 26) as the foundational principle for the constitution of a society of “frugal abundance”. The de-growth strategy is not dependent on the industrial exploitation of nature and the working classes, nor their fiscal/financial exploitation. Rather, it relies on the protection of nature and the friendly relations with nature, and requires a different system of production and consumption that is not based upon race, blood or ethnicity, but that adopts local solidarity, moderation and self-determination as the grounding social values (p. 79). De-growth aims to build an alternative economic, political and cultural structure in the

creation of a radical form of democracy to counter the growth-obsessed political minds and policies that continue to be informed and established by techno-scientific reasoning and techno-bureaucratic governance.

The de-growth society is an alternative to the capitalist society that increases consumerism and individualism at the expense of nature and the welfare of society by pushing production and capital accumulation to the utmost levels. According to Latouche, the alternative is an exit from capitalism based on an unlimited growth regime. That said, the de-growth society, as an alternative to the unrestrained growth society, does not adopt a zero growth or stagnation approach (pp. 42-52), but rather gives up on understanding the economy with the concept of growth. According to Latouche's conceptualization, this renunciation represents a "salvation of the imagination from the state of its colonialism" (p. 47) by the capitalist economic logic, and opens up a different horizon of economic mind and meaning. The de-growth society is, as such, offers an alternative understanding and knowing of the economy, requiring a different economic subject who is aware of the physical limits of the ecosystem and who defends it against the normative capitalist economic reasoning that exploits nature endlessly. In this respect, de-growth puts forward a contra-capitalist approach to the world, lifestyle and the ways of doing. De-growth, seemingly a semantic opposite of growth, does not necessarily and narrowly mean the decline of the economy, being rather a project to create a different society that conceives abundance and welfare outside the scope of the growth economy. De-growth is also a political instrument that would prevent the formation of authoritarian regimes, both now and in the future, for the management of the famine that the unlimited growth paradigm, relying on the techno-scientific and techno-bureaucratic government, will paradoxically and inevitably cause as a result of its consumption of the ecosystem and biosphere. The basic values of de-growth are as follows: "(1) we do not desire the unrestricted and thoughtless dissemination of production. We want economy to be a tool, not a purpose of human life; (2) we want the free dissemination of information, but this should not be detached from the prudence, that is, *phronesis*" (p. 60).

De-growth is a "*permaculture*" (permanent culture), that is, a mode of agriculture that relies on the protection of the soil and the balance of the ecosystem in such a way the human life is embedded into nature, but does not deform it. In line with this, de-growth is a "political ecology" that does not see the relationship of nature with human beings to be one of domination, and develops a "soft science" that is appropriate for the human-nature friendship (p. 62). It is not technologically determinist, as the problems of the economy are social, that is, a result of deliberate choices and pursuits resulting from a certain value system. In this sense, the economy, economics and economic problems are all normative, and should be normalized if the economy is to be rightly understood as a common interest, and if positive solutions to its problems are to be developed. Accordingly, the problems of unlimited growth cannot be resolved by techno-scientific reasoning and techno-bureaucratic politics, since they are the source of the problem, making the unlimited growth paradigm "myth" and "religion" that should be replaced by a cultural value system of de-growth and its "soft science". Latouche insists that this value system does not mean a return to past and conservative longing for past values. De-growth does not share reactionary, counter-modernist and

counter-Enlightenment attitudes, but is rather an attempt to build a future by exploring and updating the positive value systems of consumption and production of past societies that are registered in the long historical development of humanity, and that would capture and promote the promises of modernism and the Enlightenment (p. 84). To this point I may add that Tunisian philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldun's praise of the nomadic life over city-life, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's tribute to the frugality and courage of the ancient republics, and David Hume's description of frugal and virtuous governmental practices in antiquity are philosophical argumentations that explain the relationship between de-growth and past societies in the search for a true practical and moral meaning of limitedness. Even Marx sublimates ancient society against capitalism, stating in *Grundrisse* (Karl Marx 1993, translated by Martin Nicolaus): "In bourgeois economics – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end. This is why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as loftier. On the other side, it really is loftier in all matters where closed shapes, forms and given limits are sought. It is satisfaction from a limited standpoint; while the modern gives no satisfaction; or, where it appears satisfied with itself, it is *vulgar*" (p. 488).

Like these philosophers of the modernism and Enlightenment, as de-growth turns its face to the past, it rediscovers the trade and nature-friendly production systems that are formed out of cultural interactions, such as the gift culture and reciprocity. In doing so, de-growth neither develops a furious approach against progress nor shares a feeling of longing for a melancholic past, being rather a permanent critique of techno-scientific progressivism that freezes capitalistic power relations and the structure of the present for the endless capital accumulation *via* an abstract ideal past.

The de-growth strategy is not only a cultural and philosophical ecological critique of the unlimited growth society. Instead, it proposes a policy for the payment of state debts from revenues arising from the progressive tax system and moderate inflation with the aim of ensuring a balanced budget, and seeks an economic model to achieve full employment. The de-growth strategy, aiming at the restriction of productivist logic and economic activity, seeks to create multiple jobs through the use of ecological techniques, many of which come from past nature-friendly traditions. The de-growth approach seeks to improve a socio-economic system of real needs for the ecological and full-employment society that consumes less energy, replacing the unbridled industrial production system that relies on the use of large amounts of fossil fuels. In a system in which needs increase as the output in economy increases, the growth of imaginary needs gives birth to a "psychological deprivation" (p. 35), the result of which is constant unhappiness. Latouche considers the logic of unlimited growth that serves productivist aspirations to be a result of "techno-bureaucratic fascism", arguing that the de-growth approach in the pursuit of an "ecological democracy" (p. 96) has a progressive political character, and that the only remedy to the two interdependent ecological and political disasters that await humanity is the de-growth plan.

The de-growth strategy employs capitalism's basic institutions and tools, such as money, market, interest, finance and wages, but does not allow them to form an

autonomous economic system that is separate from and against society and nature. This point has led to severe criticisms of de-growth for not having properly clarified how it is possible to surpass capitalism without eliminating its foundational institutions. In addition, the state is not rated here as the main capitalist institution, and it is not made clear how it can be instrumentalized, if possible, as an active subject for this great transformation under the auspices of the de-growth strategy. That said, the de-growth approach insists that it is consistently anti-capitalist, and its strategy seems to be targeting the gradual abolition of capitalism through extensive ecological regulation. Accordingly, de-growth re-builds the economic science and production-consumption nexus as a system created on the basis of an anti-capitalist social value system. The alternative to the capitalist requirement of consumption and unlimited growth demands an economic logic and activity that is symbolized by the eight-R formula of “Re-valuation”, “Reconceptualizing”, “Restructuring”, “Reinstatement”, “Redistribution”, “Reduction”, “Reutilization” and “Recycling” (pp. 107-108). According to Latouche, the de-growth strategy is counter-capitalist, in that it disrupts the heart of capitalism – the mythicized and fetishized logic of unlimited growth – with a significant transformation that is led by a new set of policies and politics, symbolized by this eight-R formula. It is against both the socialism of the real and existing experience under a techno-bureaucratic government, and the industrial system under the technoscientific paradigm. From this point of view, de-growth can be considered a search for an “imaginary and creative alternative” (p. 112) that is inspired by the experiences and values recorded in the long history of humanity.

In the second part of his book, in which the issue is opened up for discussion, Latouche tries to clarify the aspects of the de-growth strategy and its anti-growth opposition in the creation of a better society in terms of real economic policies. This discussion part both corrects any misunderstandings and responds to objections. It begins by revealing the invalidity of the argument that the digital economy, cognitive capitalism and the new economy has ushered in a growth model that is not harmful to nature, and eliminates the need to reduce growth through the expansion of the service sector, thus reducing material production. However, increasing the service sector in the new economy has actually increased industrial production and the consumption of natural resources in satisfying the need for the tools and equipment needed by this composite sector. The argument that growth in GDP does not denote an increase in production, but an increase in market value, brings about a politically unfavorable result for Latouche. The political result of the decrease in material production and the increase in market value based on statistical and exchange value can lead to “dictatorial and totalitarian persecution” (p. 123), and the resource scarcity problem and the decline in production can make possible a new authoritarian regime. Latouche warns that due to the problems created by the limitless growth paradigm can produce a dangerous idea of population reduction, which may lead to techno-bureaucratic fascist, totalitarian and dictatorial societies that seek the adoption of eugenism. De-growth as a critical politics and policy precisely defends and aims at the establishment of an ecological democratic system in which the issue of population is not quantitative in nature, and in which demographic decline can develop of its own accord as a result of the creation of the humane and natural conditions under the eight-R policy.

Growth cannot be a remedy for poverty in the countries in the North, as the logic and policies of unlimited growth exacerbate and intensify it. The development of a logic of coercive growth model and its adoption by states in parallel to the decline in growth since the 1970s have increased and exacerbated the problem of poverty. In juxtaposition, the de-growth movement can displace poverty and can establish a system that is based upon real needs, producing imaginary needs within a nature- and human-friendly value system. Similarly, growth cannot be an economic development or community model in South Africa, nor in Asian countries, as the logic of growth will result in permanent exploitation by the advanced capitalist countries in the North. This makes them the “victims” and “others” of the world, as they are forced to remove such local institutions and networks of solidarity as “self-organization, frugal administration, informal economy” and cooperatives, and to abandon the spirit of gifting and reciprocity under the pressure of the unlimited growth paradigm and its corresponding politics (p. 148). The new countries of growth – China, Brazil and India – are considered by Latouche to be not so much miracles of the unlimited growth model, but countries that have experienced the problems that emerged out of the logic and policies of the unlimited growth strategy.

Latouche devotes the final pages of his book to the question of how a transition to de-growth can be possible, and considers alternative approaches, such as an elitist revolution from above or a bottom-up revolution, raising the question of who would be the subject of such a great transformation. According to Latouche, the subject who will undertake and realize the de-growth project is the global population and humanity itself. Universal realization is mandatory, however the creation of a new world is not within the responsibility or power of a single class or subject. A new world is possible through a universal base-population movement that will make radical changes in the long-established approaches and values. For Latouche, this can begin in Europe, where the unlimited capitalist growth in history is well established. Europe is a matrix of differences, and exists within multiple universalities. As such, its populations can pave the way for a global redirection toward de-growth in the wake of the devastating effects of the crisis of 2008, from which austerity emerged as the latest logic, morality and policy in support of unlimited growth. In its countering of austerity, this book is helpful in providing concise and sound insights into an alternative counter-capitalist growth and development program in both theory and practice.

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