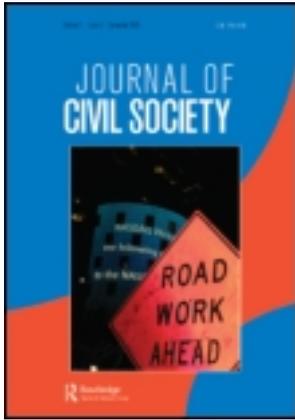


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Civil and Uncivil Actors for a Degrowth Society

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ABSTRACT *Within the context of the ecological crisis and technocratic drift of western nations whose overarching goal is economic growth, a plea for degrowth is emerging. In this essay, the concept of degrowth is adopted as an interpretative frame to describe a variety of forms of grassroots activism, mainly across crisis-ridden Europe. Particular attention is devoted to the distinction between forms of alternative activism that respect conventional societal norms and forms of resistance that fundamentally reject some of the key tenets of contemporary market economies. These two forms of grassroots mobilization, whose actors we define, respectively, as 'civil' and 'uncivil', constitute different (albeit perhaps complementary) imaginaries emerging out of the civil society arena, thus likely to lead to a profound reconsideration of authority (and legitimacy). The integration of both dimensions may contribute to the construction of a new degrowth society.*

KEY WORDS: Degrowth, civil society arena, frame, civil and uncivil actors

Introduction

Market capitalism is, by and large, a key pillar of contemporary democratic societies. So much so that market freedom and democratic rule are generally viewed as two sides of the same coin, whose ultimate objective is to increase society's development, invariably measured in terms of (economic) growth. Yet, as Greenham and Ryan-Collins discuss in this collection, the paradigm of continuous economic growth cannot be sustained in a finite planet, given that nominal growth (measured in terms of gross domestic product, GDP) is in a fundamental disequilibrium with the availability of natural resources. Moreover, over the last century, the financial sector has come to dominate the so-called real economy (i.e. the actual industrial throughput producing goods and services for

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consumption), implying higher volatility, greater system instability, and lower social and environmental resilience. Indeed, this is what many nations have been experiencing since the outburst of the global economic crisis in 2008. In addition, the imperative of growth has resulted in a 'technocratic turn', mainly in suffering European economies, which has further impoverished democratic institutions, thus showing the fundamental limits of the symbiosis between economic growth and democracy.

This essay maintains that the world is facing a multi-dimensional crisis where social, economic, ecological and political imbalances are fundamentally interconnected. While we consider the obvious ecological limits to growth, we also would like to place emphasis on important concerns regarding the social, anthropological and democratic implications of an economic system obsessed with growth. In this vein, the concept of degrowth can be used to frame a variety of actions, some characterized by a gradual reformist approach, while others are marked by a more radical rejection of the capitalist diktat. Although these various forms of resistance may not view themselves as specific expressions of degrowth, we believe that their practices and objectives are fundamentally aligned with the ultimate critique of the degrowth paradigm, that is the refutation of the growth fetishism.

The essay is organized as follows: the next section introduces our theoretical framework, while the central sections discuss various types of activism through the lens of the degrowth frame. The essay also describes some illustrative case studies and then, in the end, offers more general concluding remarks.

Degrowth as an Interpretative Frame for Grassroots Activism

The contemporary context of neoliberal capitalism appears as a post-political space, where the *zeitgeist* of western society has assumed indeed the characteristics of a moral discourse in which the distinction between the political right and left has become impossible: There is only right and wrong (Mouffe, 2005). Such a 'moralistic' discourse serves to reinforce the growth paradigm, which is largely accepted throughout societies (in global East and West, North and South) as an unquestioned imperative. In this regard, it has been argued that counter-hegemonic discourses and praxis are needed to re-politicize the debate about what kind of society we want to live in and open up alternative avenues (Mouffe, 2005). We maintain that the 'degrowth' discourse contributes to building such a counter-hegemonic narrative.

The concept of degrowth emphasizes the need to reject the growth fetishism of contemporary economies and construct alternative forms of society, based on resilience, participation, and social justice. Far from being a simplistic apology of negative growth (in terms of falling GDP), the degrowth discourse aims to liberate societies from the growth imperative and open up space for a more critical approach to development and well-being. For this reason, it has become a confluence point for several streams of critical ideas and political action. From a sociological perspective, it can be defined as an interpretative frame for an emerging social movement, intended as the mechanism through which actors engage in new collective action (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). An interpretative frame enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label events they experience (Goffman, 1974; Snow *et al.*, 1986). It is by no coincidence that anti-car activists, cyclists, pedestrian rights campaigners, organic agriculture defenders, critics of urbanization, and

promoters of solar energy and local currencies have all started to see degrowth ideas as an appropriate representation for their world views and/or counter-hegemonic practices.

Degrowth as an interpretative frame provides an integrated diagnosis of the problems facing society and links it with the possibility for action by multiple actors. Degrowthers become 'signifying agents' involved in the production of alternative meanings and counter-hegemonic practices, which are at the antipodes of those defended by mainstream discourse. In turn, this puts emphasis on what type of social groups are leading such a shift and calls for an analysis of the ensemble of strategies, and the matrix of alternatives (Latouche, 2011), which attempt to ecologize the present (Latour, 1998).

'Civil' and 'Uncivil' Actors

The trivialization of the discussion around the 'subjects of change' has often provided a generic reference to civil society (Latouche, 2011). By contrast, this collection of essays has adopted an 'open' definition of civil society, which rejects more common (and narrower) understandings (Heinrich & Fioramonti, 2007). While traditionally civil society has been defined as the proprietary class (for instance, by forefathers of liberalism such as John Locke and Adam Ferguson), or, more recently, the web of associations and non-profits that build social capital and contribute to economic growth (Putnam, 1993), the understanding of civil society as an open arena emphasizes the co-existence (and often competition) of different values, objectives, and approaches (Fioramonti & Fiori, 2010). The civil society arena includes the 'good, the bad, and the ugly', with some forces within it being agents of change and others striving for the preservation of the status quo. Also, modes of action differ, with some being seen as 'civil' while others are often framed as 'uncivil'. Yet even these representations are subject to continuous change in the open civil society arena: What is viewed as radical today may be considered mainstream tomorrow and what is considered uncivil today may be regarded as civil tomorrow. In fact, in the civil society arena, ideas and ideologies are continuously re-elaborated and hegemonic paradigms only enjoy a temporary domination, being challenged by new views and values (Gramsci, 2007).

Thus, within the civil society arena, it is possible to distinguish between 'civil' and 'uncivil' actors. The former, according to Putnam (1993), are groups that, by virtue of greater endowments of social capital and horizontal practices, can guarantee economic growth and can boost democratization processes;¹ the latter, we maintain, are groups that not only resist the governmentality project à la Foucault (i.e. the ensemble of practices through which governments produce 'good' citizens, best suited to accomplish the government's policies), but also express the unwillingness to be ruled by the growth fetishism.² We pretend that the above definitions, not intended to be Manichean, liberate the resistance discourse and opens new possibilities for the understanding of radical change.

The Degrowth Frame

The word *Décroissance* (French for degrowth) appeared for the first time in 1972 in the proceedings from a public debate organized in Paris by the *Club du Nouvel Observateur*, and was mentioned several times (Amar, 1973; Georgescu-Roegen, 1979; Gorz, 1977) following the publication of the *Limits to Growth* report by the Club of Rome (Meadows, Meadows, & Randers, 1972). In 1982, a conference was organized in Montreal with the

title *Les enjeux de la décroissance* (The Challenges of Degrowth), but the concept was used as a synonym for economic recession (ACSALF, 1983). *Décroissance* only became an activist slogan in France in 2001, Italy in 2004 (as *Decrescita*), and Catalonia and Spain in 2006 (as *Decreixement* and *Decrecimiento*). Degrowth as a slogan was used to challenge the fetishism of growth and to call for a democratic redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialized countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice, and well-being (Demaria *et al.*, 2013). Later on, activists and practitioners—especially in Europe—began to use degrowth not only as a slogan against mainstream imaginaries, but also to promote alternative practices and life styles (Bernard, Cheynet, & Clémentin, 2003).

The English term ‘degrowth’ was introduced at the first International Degrowth conference in Paris in 2008, which also marked the establishment of degrowth as an international research area. The term entered the academic debate (Fournier, 2008; Victor, 2008, 2010) and, since 2010, at least five special issues of international peer-reviewed journals have been dedicated to the subject (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2012; Kallis, Kerschner, & Martinez-Alier, 2012; Saed, 2012; Schneider, Kallis, & Martinez-Alier, 2010; Sekulova *et al.*, 2013). Degrowth has also made inroads in political debates and in mainstream media, including renowned newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Dupin, 2009), *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *The Wall Street Journal* (Assadourian, 2012), and *Financial Times* (Caldwell, 2011). At the same time, degrowth has been subject to diverging and often reductionist interpretations. Marxist authors have accused degrowth of not engaging with the capitalistic structure of modern society by being based simply on ethics, good practices, and lifestyle rather than political conflict (Foster, 2011). Others have referred to degrowth as an ideology, thus attributing it a negative connotation. Many keep interpreting it as a mere decrease in GDP, which is a highly skewed and reductive view of the term (Castells, 2012). Considering the weak and arbitrary nature of GDP as an indicator of economic performance (Van den Bergh, 2009, 2011) and following Latouche (2009), the principles of degrowth are better exemplified by the term ‘a-growth’, which underlines the necessity of enfranchising society from the growth ideology, just like a-theism proactively cut loose from the existence of God and its influence in society. There is an endless debate over the slogan, but undoubtedly, since degrowth is much more politically catchy than a-growth, the term has enjoyed growing currency (see also Kallis, 2011; Van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012).³

We contend that degrowth is not just an economic concept. Launched at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a *mot-obus* (a bombshell word; Ariès, 2005) by activists, it has become an interpretative frame constituted by a large array of concerns, goals, strategies, and actions. Moreover, as a case of activist-led science, degrowth is also becoming a concept discussed in academia and might aspire to become a new paradigm for radical change (Demaria *et al.*, 2013; Schneider, Kallis, & Martinez-Alier, 2010). Degrowth has multiple intellectual sources articulating a diagnosis of the unsustainable essence of the capitalist society and offers a prognosis for socially sustainable transformation (Bayon, Flipo, & Schneider, 2010; Demaria *et al.*, 2013; Flipo, 2007). The four most prominent strains of thought embedding degrowth are the economic and ecological limits to growth; the social limits to growth and well-being; the anthropological limits to growth and the cultural critics of development; the democratic and justice limits to growth (Demaria *et al.*, 2013).

Greenham and Collins in this collection provide a thorough analysis of the ecological and economic limits to growth. The social critique to growth largely deals with the role that positional goods play in the achievement of well-being. Indeed, the unequal distribution and access to these goods often creates social disequilibria leading to a spiral of ever increasing consumption (Hirsch, 1977). Moreover, accelerated growth often results in longer working hours and less work-life balance and also exerts a toll on social ties and cohesion (Fioramonti, 2013). In turn, this explains why increases in GDP do not contribute significantly to welfare and general happiness, at least not after a minimum level of satisfaction of basic needs has been achieved (Easterlin, 1974).

Anthropological and cultural criticisms question the theoretical foundations of neoclassical economics and its attempts to simplify the complexity of human beings and their interpersonal relationships to that of self-interested, pleasure-seeking, and utility-maximizing individuals. The 'Anti-utilitarian Movement in Social Science' (*Mauss* in French) argues that the gift economy, based on reciprocity, is better suited to preserve important equilibria and enhance human interactions (Caillé, 1989; Mauss, 2007). Political economist Karl Polanyi (1944) also posed a fundamental critique to the market-based economy by showing that the market, with all its prerogatives, is not at all a natural institution. Cultural studies have criticized development theories based on a simplistic continuum of progress from developing to developed countries (Deb, 2009; Escobar, 1995; Rist, 2003; Sachs, 1992). Finally, a number of analysts have argued that the growth imperative also impoverishes democracy, mainly by strengthening the grip of technocratic powers on the reins of government (Asara, Profumi, & Kallis, 2013). As growth is viewed as the only way to produce well-being and attain development, democratic decision-making becomes ancillary to economic governance, which—by virtue of its technical arrangements—is best placed in the hands of experts (Fioramonti, 2013). As a result, representative democracy is weakened (as evidenced by the rise of technocracy all over the world and, more recently, in crisis-ridden European countries, such as Greece and Italy) and a profound disjunction emerges between the goals of democracy and those of growth (Castoriadis, 1998; Asara, Profumi, & Kallis, 2013).

In the past century, citizenship imaginaries have been identifying the sources of authority with democratic regimes (through parliamentary representation) and free market entrepreneurship (the bourgeois ideal). Such an enduring interconnection between democratic states and free markets, lately reinforced by the fall of the Soviet bloc, has implied that the public good can be achieved through economic performance, thus turning the growth imperative into the state's main public policy. However, the present crisis of capitalism, which is deeply related to the physical limits to growth, is contributing to the erosion of democratic rights in many countries. As a consequence, the maintenance of the capitalistic status quo and growth for the sake of growth imply a political drift from the achievement of the public good. To this extent, it becomes clear that democracy is only instrumental to the real objective, that is, capitalist growth. If the crisis is to be addressed in a sustainable and long-term fashion, then new imaginaries reaching beyond the growth-based ideals of state and market must be identified (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2012).

Actors and Strategies of Degrowth

As mentioned earlier, the definition of civil society as an open arena helps avoid generic claims about the inherent virtue of civic actors as prominent degrowth intellectuals have

done (Latouche, 2011). Different actors may indeed subscribe to conflicting values and adopt a diverse range of rules of engagement (or disengagement) with other forces and sources of authority in society, both within the state and the market. In this regard, we have decided to look at a variety of actors and strategies carried out in the name of degrowth as well as counter-hegemonic actors and practices whose ideals, without an explicit reference to degrowth, are in line with the degrowth frame. Bearing in mind the diversity of activism within the civil society arena, we identify a continuum of degrowth actors. On the one hand, we find groups that collaborate with public authorities for marginal reforms (e.g. political parties), those who work together with established civil society organizations (e.g. non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social enterprises, etc.) or those who act as pressure groups to core democratic institutions (e.g. trade unions). On the other hand, we place those who struggle within (new) social movements for more radical reforms, those who can be identified as practitioners building alternatives or civil disobedience actors and, at the far extreme, activists considered subversive by present authorities or, more in general, by the hegemonic social and political imaginary.

Citizens' networks opposing globalized markets have been proliferating in the past two decades (i.e. the global justice movement, which has often, and erroneously, been labelled 'no global', or the *Occupy/Indignados* movements). Degrowth promoters have been part and parcel of these networks, which are made up of a heterogeneous set of actors including grassroots activists opposing market-led society, practitioners developing alternatives, academic researchers, and politicians.⁴ Explicit degrowth networks have also emerged nationally and regionally since 2000 in France, Italy, and Spain, with also an informal international academic network consolidating around degrowth conferences. The movement is now spreading to Belgium, Switzerland, Finland, Poland, Greece, Germany, Portugal, Norway, Denmark, Czech Republic, Mexico, Brazil, Puerto Rico, and Canada;⁵ more than 50 groups from around the world organized simultaneous 'picnics' for Degrowth in 2010 and 2011.⁶

Martinez-Alier *et al.* (2011) argue that degrowth is also an example of activist-led science, where an activist slogan is slowly consolidating into a concept analysed and discussed in the academic arena. Similarly, we can refer to 'activist knowledge', 'research cooperation' between academics and engaged activists, 'co-operative research' or 'action research'. Activist knowledge refers to experience-based notions originating from community groups, civil society, women's groups, trade unions, grassroots associations, etc. The knowledge gained from grassroots experience and activism has already led to the creation of new concepts, like the ecological and climate debts, bio-piracy, and popular epidemiology (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Simms, 2005). Degrowth conferences deviate from the standard models of academic conference organization and use practical direct democracy techniques to discuss and develop policy proposals and research priorities in different areas.

Most NGOs, trade unions and political parties are still far from discussing degrowth. However, with the worsening of the global multi-dimensional crisis, the issue has been increasingly penetrating the broader socio-political debates. The establishment of a dialogue with trade unions remains a pending task. Interestingly, in Germany, a wide debate over 'limits to growth' is just emerging and major trade unions participated in a conference on 'Post-Wachstum' (post-growth) organized in Berlin in May 2011, which featured 2000 participants and lively debates on degrowth (Demaria *et al.*, 2011). Other small and radical trade unions, such as the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist trade union Confederación General del Trabajo, have also endorsed degrowth.

Similar hesitance has been shown by international NGOs. For instance, ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Aid to Citizens) leaders tend to be sceptical of degrowth, although some local branches have proved less recalcitrant to the theme. The same may be said about Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. An exception is *Ecologistas en Acción*, the largest Spanish network of environmental organizations, which decided to officially endorse degrowth and launched a campaign on 'less is more' in 2007.⁷ Political parties all over Europe, including green parties, have generally ignored degrowth, with the only exception of the French green party that talks of 'selective degrowth' and its member Yves Cochet, former French Minister of the Environment, who publicly defends economic degrowth. It remains to be seen what will happen in Italy, where within the *Movimento 5 stelle*, the party that received the most votes (about 25%) in the February 2013 elections and is led by the comedian Beppe Grillo, there are several local groups that have shown interest in degrowth. Some attempts have also been made to create new and ad hoc parties or political movements, with an incipient but premature 'party for degrowth' in France. A few other small left-wing parties have shown interest and mentioned degrowth in their political programmes, such as Spanish *Izquierda Unida*, *Bildu* in the Basque Country or *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular*, and *Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds* in Catalunya. In Italy, degrowth parties such as *Costituente ecologista*, *Uniti, ma diversi*, or *Partito per la Decrescita* have not created much interest while the more innovative *Rigenerazioni*, which proposes a platform for non-electoral participation, has elicited more widespread endorsement.⁸

Degrowth has more successfully flourished in the interstices of grassroots activist spheres, which are less institutionalized, more ground-breaking and radical. Such local activists (often animated by more pragmatic concerns rather than overarching ideological or political manifestos) promote local, decentralized, small-scale, participatory and, therefore, more autonomous alternatives such as cycling, car-sharing, reuse, vegetarianism or veganism, co-housing, agro-ecology, eco-villages, solidarity economy, consumer cooperatives, alternative (so-called ethical) banks or credit cooperatives as well as decentralized renewable energy cooperatives (Conill *et al.*, 2012). A (bio)diversity of actions, defined 'nowtopia' by Carlsson (2008), hinge on the change of individual values and behaviours manifested in sustainable lifestyles of people who practice voluntary simplicity (frugality), i.e. living better with less, downshifting and slowing down life's pace. These alternatives to present consumption patterns are often disseminated to the general public through dedicated magazines such as the Catalan *Opcions* and the Italian *Altraeconomia*.

An obvious issue, of course, has been that of scale. Many start with a change in lifestyle and then continue to higher scales such as neighbourhoods, cities, and regions. The most well-known international initiative at the urban level is the Transition Towns (TT) Network launched in 2006, which aims to fight climate change, increase the resilience of local municipalities and reduce the consumption of fossil energy. Some years before similar experiences had already emerged in Italy, such as the Network of New Municipalities (*Rete Nuovi Municipi*), which promoted direct democracy for self-sustainable local development, and the network of Virtuous Towns (*Comuni Virtuosi*), which have been emphasizing environmental planning, ecological footprints, zero waste policies, and sustainable lifestyles for its own citizens. All these cases are the expression of what could be defined as best practices of active citizenship and far-sightedness of local administrators, who strongly collaborate with each other to realize a better

(local) world, shrinking their consumption and production of nature and reinforcing their autonomy from market forces.

It has been argued that the TT movement is an example of the post-political condition because it is based on the assumption that a consensus can always be found, while politics is, often, the conflict of antagonistic and not reconcilable discourses (Trapeze Collective, 2008). On the one hand, TT mainly focuses on only one *problematique* (peak oil and climate change); on the other hand, TT never enters into conflicts with entrenched interests and actors defending pro-growth agendas (if there is no one responsible, then there are no enemies). Therefore, it ends up proposing practical solutions that are not necessarily substantiated by a clear analysis of the root causes of the contemporary predicament. This, of course, does not deny the impressive success of TT to mobilize communities.

Similar to these initiatives are a number of experiences that could be grouped under the idea of eco-communities, including eco-villages and co-housing initiatives. It is worth mentioning here the ‘rurban’ squats of Barcelona, such as Kan Pasqual, Can Piella, and Can Masdeu projects.⁹ Far from identifying the state and capitalist markets (including the labour market) as the sources of their social imaginaries, their inhabitants (and, to a certain extent, the participants in their social centres and in their community organic gardens) pursue lifestyles that are based on alternative communal living, where horizontal self-organization and the pursuit of autonomy are central (e.g. do-it-yourself practices where the ‘self’ can also be intended at the community level). These practices revolve around the importance of ‘time’ (focusing on how it is employed and for the direct satisfaction of what is needed) and the removal of any market intermediation (e.g. through the generation of self-employment initiatives such as bread baking, beer brewing, restoration services, etc.) or, to a minor extent, with some form of participation in the labour market. Such practices of time management—which are common to many squatters’ lifestyles and are more relevant in rural and rurban cases given the possibility of primary production and of do-it-yourself activities (Cattaneo, 2008)—are characterized by an opposition to capitalism through the rejection of waged labour (Carlsson & Manning, 2010). The motivation behind unwaged labour is, in these cases, stronger than the rewards received by waged labour. The experience of rurban squats, which constitute lifestyles built around self-organization, cooperation, and unwaged labour, combined with a regime of self-proposed austerity and anti-consumerism, diminish dramatically the need for monetary income and, as a consequence, the need for a full-time employment. Although similar to the TT movement in its final objectives, Kan Pasqual, Can Masdeu, and Can Piella are also squats and, therefore, challenge private poverty in general and real estate speculation in particular, the latter of which has been largely acknowledged as a structural cause of the global financial crisis. Right after its inception, the members of the Can Masdeu, through an action of civil disobedience, resisted an eviction attempt. Avoiding the use of violence, the resistance against the eviction attempt contributed to positively shaping the conception that society had of those squatters. The action was aimed at defending a squatting project whose background philosophy lays at the margin of what could be understood as an ‘uncivil’ form of life, in so much it refuses the mainstream values such as property, employment, comfort and, above all, growth for growth’s sake.

At the regional level, there are experiences like the Italian Solidarity Economy Networks (in Italian, *Reti di Economia Solidale*). Established in 2002, they are an experiment to articulate and consolidate existing experiences through the creation of

economic circuits, where the various participating projects sustain each other, exchanging and creating social market spaces while aiming at well-being and sustainability. They have given rise to more than 20 Solidarity Economy Districts (in Italian, *Distretti di Economia Solidale*) with hundreds of small enterprises working as business clusters under strong socio-ecological principles. Similarly, different social groups have developed the Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC), which is based on economic and political self-management with egalitarian participation of its members and attempts to satisfy all basic human needs; the transactions of the cooperative are also facilitated by the adoption a local currency (the 'ECOS'). One of CIC's most prominent projects is Calafou,¹⁰ a new eco-industrial cooperative in a derelict industrial textile mill dating back to the nineteenth century on the Anoia river, roughly a 100 km from Barcelona. Calafou hosts 35 small flats, 12,000 m² of industrial buildings, a small school, communal dining, theatre, and an abandoned church.

Finally, other degrowth actors are often engaged in oppositional activism, such as the campaigners working to stop the expansion of highways, airports, high-speed trains, or incinerators, which calls into question those aspects of modernity related to never-ending expansion of infrastructure. As a matter of fact, all types of socio-environmental conflicts studied by political ecology and ecological economics might be falling under this category. We refer to struggles over the unequal distribution of (ecological) costs and benefits of any development projects (i.e. mining, waste disposal, industries, privatization of water management, etc.) which are related to economic growth and therefore the expansion of social metabolism (the flows of energy and materials in the economy), prominently in the Global South (Martinez-Alier, 2002) but also in the North (D'Alisa *et al.*, 2010). The Global Alliance for Alternatives to Incineration represents a good example of an international network opposing waste incineration and the promotion of more sustainable waste management practices such as the 'zero waste strategy'.

Opposition is not only limited to socio-environmental conflicts, but also to any of the issues related to the sources mentioned above. Moreover, it can take different forms: demonstrations, boycotts, civil disobedience, direct action, or protest songs. The *indignados* and Occupy movements, although not explicitly in favour of degrowth, share at least the concerns of the democratic limits to growth that they express by defeating the state by illegally squatting and reclaiming public spaces. In some cases, the coincidence with degrowth is even closer. For example, the *indignados* of Barcelona declared in their manifesto that 'the economic system based on infinite growth is unsustainable'. Another example of degrowth opposition in the financial sector is the action taken by Catalan degrowth activist Enric Duran. In September 2008, Duran publicly announced that he had 'robbed' nearly a half-million euros by legally receiving relatively small loans from several banks, which he had no intention of returning (as he had spent them on worthy social causes). This was a political action to denounce what he termed the 'predatory capitalist system'. One purpose of his act was to call into question the legitimacy of the banking system and reveal the accountable power of credit institutions. Referring to the creation of money as loans that Greenham and Collins discuss in this collection, Duran declared that if the banks can create money from nothing, 'I'll make them disappear into nothingness.' From 2006 to 2008, he financed various anti-capitalist movements, including magazines printed in a hundred thousand copies focusing on the energy crisis (i.e. peak oil), on critiques of the debt-based economy, and on presenting concrete alternatives for a sustainable economy of solidarity.¹¹

Conclusion: The Politics and Legitimacy of Degrowth

Considering the erosion of democratic rights at the expense of the restoration of the pre-crisis status quo, the role of degrowth strategies (particularly those that constitute seemingly ‘uncivil’ practices) can be interpreted as a reaction against traditional centres of public authority (e.g. governments and markets), which have been driving the economic growth ideology, inculcating it as the ultimate goal for achieving social well-being.

From our analysis of degrowth as an interpretative frame, it emerges clearly that different actors and strategies can co-exist and be combined coherently. There is not only a potential compatibility among the strategies, but the combination of certain strategies can also enable successful transformation. The movement has the urgent task of elaborating a transformation path in rich societies from the actual crisis of economic growth to degrowth. Under this perspective, strategies can be combined along a defined timescale with a view to shaping scenarios in the short- and long-term.

Second, radical (uncivil) strategies are at least as important as the less oppositional (civil) ones, especially if degrowth is to be seen as a ‘passage of civilization’, as preached during the 2012 Degrowth Conference held in Venice. In fact, radical strategies are explicitly exiting the growth imaginary—and therefore the interpretation of modernity as the era of productivity—opening up the space for alternative socio-environmental politics. While more ‘civil’ forms of activism, such as the Transition initiatives, hold the potential to involve a wide variety of individuals (regardless of their political views) and thus build a strong network of pragmatic, local, day-to-day change, their hesitance to enter the more political terrain may undermine the attainment of results at the macro level, at least in the short term. Moreover, the risk of co-optation by conventional market forces is always present, just like it happened with most cooperatives and the ecologism of the early days, which has been turned into mainstream environmentalism and green capitalism.

By contrast, the more radical rejection of conventional norms exemplified by groups such as the rural squats of Barcelona (or some spin offs of the *indignados* and Occupy movements), with its fundamental rejection of the politics of growth, is forcing people to understand the underlying connection between capitalism, private property (especially of land) and the anti-democratic effects of growth. Obviously, such overtly rebellious strategies may alienate more moderate sympathizers (and thus reduce the capacity of these groups to build the necessary critical mass), as it happened with many antagonist groups in the 1970s. Yet, it is interesting to note that examples like the rural squats have become more and more socially accepted, especially in countries that are facing the dire social, political, and economic consequences of the global recession. Kan Pasqual, Can Masdeu, and Can Piella often appear in mainstream media as cutting-edge social and ecological projects. Similarly, Enric Duran has not gone back to jail despite having ‘robbed’ banks. His oppositional activism, far from being a Far West type of assault on the banks for individual interest, is viewed by many people as justifiable civil disobedience against those institutions primarily responsible for the economic crisis. Moreover, from the perspective of a degrowth imaginary, Duran’s action was ‘uncivil’ in the deepest sense as he highlighted the necessity to escape the current civilization driven by the growth fetishism, which is characterized by the adulation of the market economy, neoliberal democracy, and the monetization of horizontal practices and trust, that is, the so-called social capital.

In summary, we have shown how and why both 'civil' and 'uncivil' approaches, in spite of their limits and risks, can be fundamental engines of the degrowth imaginary.

Possibly the coming years will experience important moves towards a new punctuated equilibrium, where new imaginaries will have reached a state of acceptability and where societies will happily embark on a process of de-toxification from the growth 'hangover', thus contributing to the sustainable transition towards a degrowth society. The future will tell if these approaches will gain ground against the current hegemonic discourse, which refuses to recognize the limits to growth and whose imaginary is responsible for the current decadence: a growth society without growth.

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Notes

1. This definition refers to the idea of civil society that Putnam (1993) had in mind when he wrote his famous book about civic traditions in Italy.
2. The uncivil actors contribute to building networks and interpersonal trust, which increase the legitimacy of their action and improve their ability to spread around 'nowtopias' (Carlson & Manning, 2010), but they do not capitalize on it to increase the value circulation of the socio-environment in which they are embedded in. For this reason, we do not use the concept of social capital to define the kind of alternative systems they give a life to.
3. Some authors (Van den Bergh, 2009; Van den Bergh & Kallis 2012) recommend using a-growth as this term highlights the need to 'ignore' GDP. However, such a position may be misleading insofar as agnosticism is not enough to debunk the growth fetishism.
4. In terms of approaches, Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor (2001) refer to rejectionist, alternative and reformist; in relation to capitalism, Chatterton and Pickerell (2010) refer to 'anti-capitalist', 'post-capitalist', and 'despite capitalism'.
5. Some examples are in Italy, *Rete per la Decrescita*; in France, *Réseau des Objecteurs de Croissance pour l'Après-Développement*; in Switzerland, *Réseau Objection de Croissance*; and in Brazil, *Rede pelo Decrescimento Sustentável*.
6. <http://picnic4degrowth.wordpress.com/>.
7. <http://www.ecologistasenaccion.org/article13381.html>.
8. <http://www.decrecita.it/joomla/index.php/component/content/article/4/20-rigenerazioni-proposta-per-un-soggetto-politico-non-elettorale>.
9. For more information, see: www.kanpasqual.ourproject.org, www.canpiella.cat, www.canmasdeu.net.
10. Calafou featured in the Degrowth conference in Montréal in May 2012 in the section tellingly called 'experiences'. More information at: cooperativa.ecoxarxes.cat.
11. Publications available in different languages at: www.17-s.info.

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