

Serge Latouche, ideologist of degrowth

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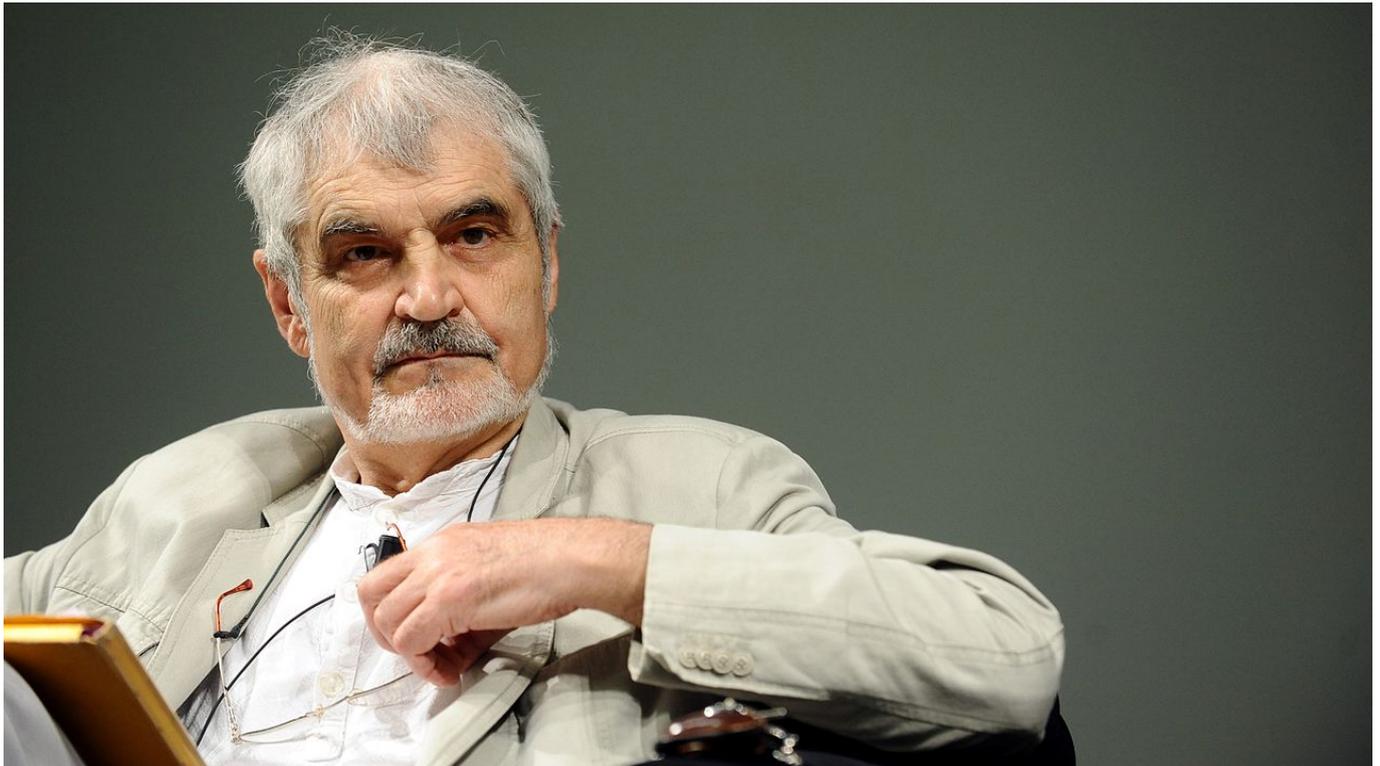
By Xavier Borràs.

Born in Vannes, Brittany, on January 12, 1940, Serge Latouche is a trained economist and philosopher, and an experienced anthropologist –not in vain he studied the knowledge of economics, political science and philosophy at Lille and Paris universities– and currently serves as professor emeritus of economics at the University of Paris-Sud (XI-Sceaux/Orsay), which he combines with Presidency of the Ligne Horizon and Institut and economic Studies Association for Sustainable Degrowth, founded by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, where they publish together with Casseurs du Pub journal *La Décroissance*(journal of the joy of life), which is also out in Italy.

In the last twenty five years, this «growth objector» –as he likes to define himself– has contributed, as not many other intellectuals, to the clarification and maturation of the concept acquainted by new global movements. During the seventies he spent many years in western Africa where he developed his thought, and from the traditional marxist positions led him to make a radical critique of the ideology of «progress» and «development», even in his own account of left-wing politics. This maturation took him in 1981 to publish with Allain Caillé the *Revue de Mauss* (Anti-utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences) and the journal *Homonima* (which also has the Italian edition).

Among his extensive work stands out *L'Occidentalisation du monde* (La Découverte, 1989); *La Planète des naufragés* (La Découverte, 1991); *L'Autre Afrique, entre don et marché* (Albin Michel, 1998); *Justice sans limites* (Fayard, 2003), and, *Survivre au développement* (Mille et Une Nuits, 2004).

We wonder how it is possible that a line of thought and a life's work such as this breton's is so unknown in our country. The answer was given not long ago by philosopher Ramon Alcoberro, while speaking about thinkers like Latouche, Ellul, Castoriadis, or Rist: «They are names which a not-well-educated person will hardly pronounce in a university faculty as is necessary - or that are plagiarised poignantly when someone wants to flatter anti-globalists.



THE INTERVIEW

What is De-Growth?

The term degrowth is being used since not so long ago in the economic, politic and social debate, although the origin of the notions implied have more or less a longer history. Until recent years, the term was not listed in any economics and social dictionary, whereas in some entries can be found with its related «zero growth», «sustainable development», and, of course, «stationary state».

However, it has a relatively complex history and an indisputable analytical and political weight in economy. It is necessary, still, to understand its meaning. The most malevolent commentators and critics point to the antiquity of the concept in order to settle more easily the subversive extent of the «objectors of growth» proposals. It's not about, indeed, neither the stationary state of the old classics, nor one way or another of regression, recession, «negative growth», nor the «zerogrowth», although we could find around a few difficulties. Nevertheless, we need to clarify degrowth is not a concept and, in any case, it's not symmetrical to growth. It is a political slogan with theoretical implications. It aims to break the deceiving language employed by those who worship productivity.

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The term of order of degrowth has also aims, above all, at strongly targeting abandonment of the goal of growth for growth's sake, the motor which is not other than the search of profit for the ones who unlawfully hold the capital and the disastrous consequences which has for the environment. Strictly speaking, we should be talking about 'a-growth', in the sense in which we speak of 'a-theism', rather than a de-growth. Precisely, it is about the abandonment of a faith or religion: that of the economy, growth, progress and development.

What is the difference between degrowth and sustainable development?

If we trace the history of the concept of development, we find its origin in evolutionary biology, which places it, therefore, in the history of western science in which it was born. Long before Darwin, biologists distinguished, regarding organisms, growth from development. A organism is born and grows, and as it grows it changes; a seed does not become a big seed, but an oak tree for instance, and that's development. but growth is not a infinite phenomenon and in the end of a period of time the organism dies.

Economists have taken this word in a metaphorical sense to an economic organism, but they forgot about death! It is clear then that from this point the concept is twisted because it embeds in itself what the greeks called hubris, the excessive. We have entered in a vicious cicle of unlimited growth, growth of consumption in order to grow production which, in turn, increases consumption and so on and so forth. It is not about, then, reaching a certain state of well-being or comfort. On the contrary, this comfort is always rejected to the infinite. It is all nonsense, it could only be mathematical. Indeed, a continuous 2 to 3% of annual growth rate would lead the economic organism to grow seven hundred times within a century – counting the compound interests. Or we live in a finite planet.

Here we face the famous «water lily theorem». If a water lily colonizes a pond doubling its surface every year, it could take it fifty years to colonize half of the pond, but it would only take one year for it to fill the remaining half. We are at this point, it is quite clear with the oil, the forests, the fishing, the climate change. We have come to believe that we can colonize everything without any problems and today we have come to understand that now everything will disappear in a short period of time.

The notion of sustainable development is not, then, a principle of solution. On the contrary, it is an oxymoron par excellence. The model of development followed by all the countries until today is fundamentally not sustainable. It could be compared, as it was done at the time with dreamed socialism to real existing socialism, dreamed development to real existing development. Development, the only one that known of, can be summed up as «always produce more of the same thing», whatever the adjective added to it. In thirty years of personal participation in third world country projects essentially in Africa, I have seen development– successively called socialist, of active participation, cooperative, autonomous, popular– having the same catastrophic results.

It should be remembered that, as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen put it, «Sustainable development

can not be separated from economic growth», even if one cannot be reduced to the other, like the development of a plant relies on the growth of the seed, and this logic of growth is incompatible with the finiteness of the planet. Development would not know to be durable nor sustainable. If we want a sustainable and durable society, we need to escape from development and consequently leave the economy because this incorporates, in its own essence, the excess.

Who have been and are the degrowth theorists?

The project of an autonomous and guardian society which embraces this slogan is not recent. Without having to go back to certain utopias from the first socialism, neither to the anarchist tradition renewed by the situationist, has been formulated under the a from close to ours from the seventies by Ivan Illich, André Gorz i Cornelius Castoriadis. The failure of development on the South and the loss of referents on the North took many thinkers to question the society of consumption with its imagined bases: the progress, the science and the technology. The raising of awareness about the environmental crisis that happened at the same time, provided with a new dimension.

The authors of the report of the Club of Rome (Meadows, Randers i Behrens) already had the certainty, in 1972, that the raising of awareness about the material limits of the world environment and the tragic consequences of a irrational explotation of the earth resources are essential to make emerge new ways of thinking that should lead to a fundamental review, together with human behaviour, and consequently, of the structure of today´s society in its whole

The notion of de–growth has, then, a doble affiliation. In one hand, it is formed by the raising of awareness about the ecological crisis, and on the hand, alongside the critical on the technology and the development.

Could it be said that there is a relation between de–growth and budism?

Certainly yes, in the sense that the rejection of the ideology of de–growth involves a decolonization of the imaginary and a real «dewesternization»

The radical simplicity proposed, among others, by Jim Merkel, from the United States, is similar to the de–growth by Serge Latouche? That is, could we speak about an ideology and, then, of a global degrowth to a global level?

Yes and no. In its book *Tools for Conviviality* (Cuaderno CIDOC, Cuernavaca, Mèxic, 1972; Joaquín Mortiz ed., Planeta, 1985), Ivan Illich praises the «sober joy of life». Illich says that the contemporary «human» condition, in which all the technologies become so invasive, he could not find more joy than in what he calls a tecno-adolescent. The necessary limitation of our consumption and of the production, the ceasing of the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of labour by capital, does not imply a «return» to a life of deprivation and of work. This means, on the contrary–if it is possible to renounce to the material comfort– a liberation of creativity, a renewal of conviviality, and the possibility to have a dignified life.

The search for the voluntary simplicity, or if it is preferred, for a austere life, has nothing to do with the prejudice of masochistic frustration. Is the choice to live the opposite, of living better actually, also in harmony with our own convictions, replacing the race for material assets for the search for the most fulfilling values. The unusual families that choose to live without television are not to be sorry about. Instead of the joys offered by the idiot box, they prefer others: familiar or social life, reading, games, artistic activities, spare time for daydreaming or simply enjoy life...this path is evidently, in general, progressive, even though the opposing pressures of society are strong. It is a path which requires to conquer our own fears, fear of nothingness, fear of shortage, fear of the future, fear also of disagreeing with the prefab moulds, fear of disassociating oneself from the current standards. It is the choice of living the moment more than to sacrifice the present life to consumption or the accumulation of systems of value without value, to the creation of a saving plan or pension responsible for addressing the fear of not having enough. A more profound reflection about the economic footprint allows, at the same time, capture the systemic character of «overconsumption» and its limits of the voluntary simplicity.

In 1961, though, the ecological footprint of France corresponded to a planet with just three today. Does this mean that French households ate less meat three times, drank three times less water and wine, cream three times less electricity or gasoline? Probably not. Only that small yogurt with strawberries we eat today have not incorporated their 8,000 km! The clothes we wear and also less fat steak devoured chemicals, pesticides, and imported soybean oil. Either way, the change of imagination, if we decide, also implies, multiple changes in mentalities are ready to party propaganda and imitation. Please mentalities "Scales" for the system to change. The kind of circle, egg and chicken type involves initiating a dynamic virtuous.

It should take some sort of natural disaster or accidental governments to take seriously the idea of ??decreasing?

Unfortunately, probably. I do not know if the end of oil, for example, may call a catastrophe. For me it would be rather good news. Oil would have been a catastrophe for humanity when you see the amount of blood and tears will be shed done. There are phenomena limit and depletion of natural resources is one. There can also be effectively engendered by natural disasters mismatch climate countries disappear under water, others are glaciers, generating hundreds of thousands of emigrants for the environment. Other phenomena are outlined. They speak little, but the industrialization of China will cause (a picture of England which led to emigration to Australia, New Zealand or the United States of between two to three million proletarians) the Out of three to five hundred camps million Chinese who will become vagabonds, who are beginning to be, that revolts or committed suicide.

Attend the largest planetarium uprooting the whole story. This can cause considerable effects of bankruptcy. Begin to add environmental effects, social and natural disasters more or less the same imbalances in the economy. We live indeed in a casino economy, in a kind of bubble artificially maintained by a flight forward in an economy of credit in advance l'economia-American, for example, lives approximately three years, . It is the balance of the rider always has to pedal faster to keep up, even if you know that what you end up with. If everything breaks down, it can really hurt.

The best you can wish for is that disasters are strong enough to awaken people, to make them change the way you see things, but it does not become the sixth species extinction, which would be the authors while victims.

What practical steps that can be taken by citizens of the first world can be waged here and now tend to decrease towards?

Measurements simple and almost harmless in appearance are likely to start the virtuous degrowth. Can you think of a transition program that is supported by some points and that is to take the consequences "sensible" diagnosis made. For example:

1. Back in the sixties-seventies to produce material with a footprint less than or equal to a planet.
2. Internalize the costs of transportation.
3. Relocating activities.
4. Adopt program peasant agriculture of the peasant confederation (Jose Bove).
5. Promote the "production" of relational goods.
6. Adopt Negawatt stage, ie, reduce energy waste in a factor 4.
7. Penalize heavily advertising costs.
8. Declared a moratorium on technological innovation, make a serious balance and reorient scientific and technical research based on new aspirations.

The internalisation of external economies, in principle orthodox economic theory, would, if carried to the extreme, perform almost the entire program of a company's growth. All ecological and social disfuncionaments could and should be paid by the companies that are responsible. Just imagine the weight of the impact of the internalisation of transport costs on the environment, health ... Obviously, companies that obey the logic of capitalist would be widely discouraged. Initially, a large number of activities would no longer be "profitable" and the system crashes. But would not this just further proof of the need to get out of this system and also via a transition towards a possible alternative?

What is the response of green parties in France the idea of ??degrowth?

The idea makes its way. The French have put green growth in its program with a motion which has won 60% of votes.

How can you influence local political level to extend this idea?

Local utopia is perhaps more realistic than we think it is the concrete experience of people coming hopes and possibilities. Fotopoulos said to stand for local elections gives the chance to start changing society from below, which is the only democratic strategy, as opposed to statist methods (proposed change society from above all protecting from the power of the state) and the finger approaches the "civil society" (no point at all to change the system.) In a vision "pluriversalista" relations between the various Polito within the global village could be regulated

by a "culture of democracy". Far from a world government, it is an instance of poli arbitration between minimum diverse sovereign status.

Raimon Panikkar says the alternative is offered (a world government) would bioregion, ie, regions where natural herds, plants, animals, water and the men are a unique and harmonious should reach a myth ... that allows universal republic implicarhi or without government or control or police the world. This requires a different kind of relationship between bioregions. Either way, the creation of local initiatives "democratic" is more "realistic" than a world democracy. If we exclude the possibility of falling head-domination of capital and economic powers is the ability to dissent. It is also the strategy of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas. Recapture or reinvention of the "commons" (common, commons, community space) and the self-organization of the bioregion of Chiapas, following the analysis makes Gustavo Esteva, is a possible illustration of the local strategy dissident.

Internet can play a role in front of these challenges?

There is an appeal in the new technologies that justifies a renewed reflection on the ways of politics and democracy. Surely these can not be made within the paradigm of the modern market, which has managed to regain internet address global supermarket. Judge tentatively ambivalence technique. Chico Mendes was assassinated on 22 December 1988 in the heart of the Amazon to Xapuri. How random the phone did not work during the following hours and the mobiles did not exist. It took hours of walking through the jungle to carry the news. However, because the spread was immediate in Brazil and worldwide.

That is, if the site properly speaking, did not exist, internet, imagined in 1964 by Paul Baran saving telematics military communications in the event of Soviet attack was used by scientists since the seventies to exchange information; and North American NGOs, are very active in the region since worked through an interconnected network. Therefore, national and international mobilization was very fast. In its edition of Saturday December 24, Jornal do Brasil published a full-page interview with the leader Amazon made three weeks ago. So, thanks to a technique invented and tuning by the CIA to exercise control planetary murder of a nasty jungle resistant oppression of the world economy, it remained silenced, and become made an overall could transform global consciousness. From Subcomandante Marcos, has served on the best use of guerrilla computer to popularize the Chiapas revolt against the "new masters of the world".

Thus, it is undeniable that certain new techniques provide new tools to fight for emancipation. However, in view of the subsequent developments of the examples cited (pursuit of expropriations in the Amazon, and that the Lula regime, and the surreptitious payment of indigenous leaders in Chiapas), should not one conclude with the philosopher Jacques Poulain that while we wait for the change of the system, there have the ability to do incredible planet we share more diligent observation of our impotent protest.

Do you think the idea of ??growth can be assumed and handled by the system, as has happened with the idea of ??sustainable development?

Difficult, but not impossible, as you can see the projects geopolitical organization semisecreta

global elite Bilderberg. A mechanistic analysis is to note that the world's population has exploded with the era of economic growth, ie, the era of capitalism term industrial. The making available of cheap and plentiful energy resource, oil, has allowed a prodigious leap and has passed the world's population of 600 million individuals in 6000. The disappearance of this nonrenewable resource condemn us to return to a number of people supporting the sustainable capacities in the world, or so the number of people before industrialization.

This thesis is supported particularly by William Stanton in his book *The Rapid Growth of Human Population 1750-2000*. This thesis is discussed in a very serious worldwide within the ASPO (Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas), and the prospects ecototalitaries the author pulls. Stanton says that the population reduction scenario with the highest probability of success must be Darwinian in all its aspects, with none of the sentimentality that have lulled the second half of the twentieth century in the fog of political correctness. This scenario, presented as a voluntary program aimed at a peaceful and equitable progressive reduction of the population in 150 years at a rate equal to the decline in oil prices. This is to avoid the nightmare of a brutal reduction through wars (including nuclear), massacres, hunger, etc. The ingredients, according to Stanton are:

- Prohibits immigration and arriving without authorization are treated as criminals.
- Abortion or infanticide is compulsory if the fetus or the baby reveal much handicapped (Darwinian selection eliminates inept).
- When, in old age, an accident or illness, an individual becomes a burden than a benefit to society, human life is stopped.
- Imprisonment is rare, replaced by corporal punishment for small offenses and painless capital punishment in serious cases...

The author is aware of the opposition to put into practice his plan and said that the biggest obstacle in the scene has more chance of success is probably (in his opinion) the devotion of unintelligent Western world by the politically correct. The answer is as ruthless as the diagnosis: the sentimentalists who can not understand the need to reduce the population of Britain 60 million to around 2 million in the next 150 years and indignant at the proposition replacement human rights by cold logic, William Stanton says could respond, "You've had your time" and it needs to measure the violent acts of protest, as it lead campaigners for animal rights or anti-abortionist could, in a Darwinian model, attract capital punishment. This almost obsessive reference to Darwinian world reunites in many analyzes of American geopolitical and without echo with the clash of civilizations Samuel Huntington.

The focus of our growth is quite another. And the desire for justice combined with sobriety push humanity towards the path of a reasonable ecological democracy rather than to a collective suicide.



[This interview made by journalist Xavier Borràs, was published in no. 15 Magazine alfalfa, 17 October 2005. Due to its interest, and the figure Latouche, have seen fit to re-post it here.]

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