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# Farewell to consumerism: Countervailing logics of growth in consumption

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## Introduction

The logic of growth is dominant in the contemporary political economy and in various notions of social and cultural prosperity (e.g. Friedman 2006; IMF, 2014; Alam, 2008). Under all sorts of regimes, from advanced capitalist market economies to planned economies, progress is usually understood to be dependent on economic expansion through the increasing use of natural resources, the creation of technology, organisational efficiency and the stimulation of consumption. However, increasingly, this dominant logic faces challenge. Ongoing environmental degradation and uneven global economic growth have led to considerable deliberation on the finite nature of growth. This has translated into a variety of countervailing logics and concepts, from the development of 'stagnation', 'equilibrium' and 'post-growth' economics (e.g. New Economics Foundation, 2010) to discussions on whether prosperity without growth is possible (Jackson, 2009) and whether we should speak of agrowth or 'degrowth' as a response to societies where growth has become the secular religion (Latouche, 2006; 2009). Political debates around degrowth now come in many variants, from modest claims made even by conservative groups and 'prudent' economists to more radical treatments that view degrowth as incompatible with capitalist modes of production and consumption (e.g. Ott, 2012). It is the latter notion of degrowth that is increasingly intertwined with general anarchist thinking and modes of prefigurative action.

Corresponding to macro-level debates about degrowth, contemporary consumption has also been subjected to a series of countervailing logics. Concepts such as anti-consumption and consumer resistance (e.g. Lee et al.,

2011), green and ethical consumption (e.g. Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt, 2010; Harisson, Newholm and Shaw, 2005), downshifting and voluntary simplicity (e.g. McDonald et al., 2006; Shaw and Newholm, 2002) are now part of both academic and everyday discourse. Although the ideological underpinnings of such consumer movements are equally diverse, some of these are explicitly informed by radical variants of degrowth and prefigurative action (e.g. Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). This is in line with general anarchist thinking emphasising how degrowth ‘...should be a collectively consented choice of life, not an externally-imposed imperative’ (Cattaneo and Gavalda, 2010: 581). For various anarchist scholars the transition to a degrowth society should therefore come from the bottom-up, as a consequence of autonomous social and political organisation rather than top-down parliamentary action (cf. Latouche, 2009). Such an approach not only foregrounds everyday action (and consumer culture) as fundamental to a degrowth agenda, but is also in line with more culturally sensitised accounts of structural transformation that assert the intersection of micro-level logics and practices with macro-level socio-political change. In the context of voluntary simplicity (i.e. ‘the foregoing of maximum consumption and possibly, income’; Shaw and Newholm, 2002: 169), for instance, Alexander (2013: 288) argues that ‘the legal, political, and economic structures will never reflect a post-growth ethics of macro-economic sufficiency until a post-consumerist ethics of micro-economic sufficiency is embraced and mainstreamed at the cultural level’. Here we wish to explore how emerging countervailing logics of growth in consumption already reflect contradictions in the notion of limitless growth, hence carrying the seeds for further socio-economic and cultural transformation.

We begin by identifying three logics of growth. Firstly, we outline the dominant logic of cultivated growth, and point to multifarious contradictions that are causing tensions within this logic. Secondly, we outline sustainable growth as the logic presenting the main challenge to the dominance of cultivated growth. Thirdly we highlight the more radical alternative logic of degrowth, which is currently at the margins of mainstream theory and practice but increasingly a key political slogan in various bottom-up movements and grassroots mobilisations. We then move to discuss the insights into everyday contemporary consumer culture which are gained from delineating the different macro-level logics of growth.

### **Three logics of growth**

We differentiate the three logics of growth (summarised in Table 1) on three important dimensions. First, each logic is underpinned by certain assumptions

regarding the relationship between the market and society. Second, the dominant actors in each logic speaks to issues of power relationships inherent within each logic. Third, each logic defines the role of consumption in markets and societies differently, in accordance with underpinning assumptions, which is in turn, manifest in a particular logic of consumption.

Logic of Growth	Underpinning assumptions	Dominant Actors	Consumption Imperative	Logic of Consumption
Cultivated growth	Economic rationality, Adam Smith’s invisible hand, neoclassical theories of economics	Multinational, world-wide market elites, governments.	Mass consumption: use up, use more (when possible) and throw away.	‘Consumer Ethic’  Self-interested, sovereign consumers’ position in society is defined through consumption.
Sustainable growth	Market and society interact and impact upon one another	Multinational, world-wide market elites, governments and middle class	Ethical consumption: buy ethical and green; reduce, re-use, recycle	‘Ethical Consumer-Citizenship’  Socially aware, sovereign consumers’ role and identity in society defined by consumption of ethical goods
Degrowth	Society resists the domination of market logics	Citizens and Activists	Post-consumption: don’t buy anything, produce what is needed within small communities; alternative hedonism	‘Post-consumerist Citizenship’.  Role in society defined by social participation

Table 1: Logics of growth in consumption

## **Cultivated growth and the consumer ethic**

Cultivated growth is the dominant, normative logic of growth which underpins capitalist, market economies and which emerges from, and is embedded in, neo-classical economic theory. It is the liberal market discourse which tends to view the free-market as an effective and efficient mechanism of exchange that is devoid of serious injustice. For example, Libertarian principles of distributive justice argue that a liberal, free market arrives at a just distribution of benefits and burdens, because it satisfies the conditions of just exchange (Lamont and Favor, 2007; Larsen and Lawson, 2013a). Thus the distribution of social and economic resources is maximised through the realisation of unrestrained, individual preferences of rational, 'economic man'. According to this logic, the bigger the market, the more benefits there are for society, thus growth is not only unbounded, but is actually pro-actively cultivated.

The associated logic of consumption is the 'consumer ethic', which Bauman (1988) explains is a life normatively motivated by consumption, where fulfilment, autonomy and freedom are sought through consumption. Central to the 'consumer ethic' is the notion of 'consumer sovereignty', which is commonly understood to mean 'the consumer is king'. The origin of the term is generally attributed to Hutt (1936), and refers simply to 'consumers tastes as the goal (or end) of production and distribution' (Rothenberg 1962: 271). Consumer sovereignty could therefore be achieved through various economic structures, even a planned economy, if production and distribution is governed by consumer tastes and preferences. However, in contemporary consumer culture, consumer sovereignty has been predominantly conflated with the principle of 'freedom of choice', and as such, has served to legitimate the idea of the 'free market' within which unimpaired choice could be exercised by sovereign consumers. Various marketing practices and consumer policies encourage consumers to exercise what is framed as their 'right to choose' in order to reap their fair share of benefits/value from the market (Larsen and Lawson, 2013b). The distribution of these benefits is therefore determined by the individual's access to resources, such as income, that are required to participate in market exchanges, and which reflect their ability to contribute to the economy. The culmination is a culture in which consumers are encouraged to use up, use more and throw away, in order to play their part in the economy and society.

The powerful and alluring logics of cultivated growth and the consumer ethic dominate contemporary consumption and consumer research; it does so even as contradictions inherent within it are plainly recognised. It is widely acknowledged that markets periodically fail in ways which mean that producers, rather than consumers, are sovereign. Producers' pursuit of growth and market

share can lead to practices and tactics that are deemed anti-competitive, such as the formation of oligopolies and monopolies. Under these circumstances, it is clear that there is no 'freedom of choice' for consumers, but it is also likely that profit takes precedence over consumer wants in determining production and distribution. Sovereignty is also negated for 'failed consumers'. Bauman (2007) describes these as people who, for a variety of reasons centred on their inability to pay, cannot become consumers and therefore fail to enact their growth-cultivating consumer duties of buying, consuming and disposing of an ever-increasing number of products. As failures, these people are excluded from the increased benefits that economic growth might deliver, thus widening the gap between the rich and the poor even further. Despite these contradictions, these logics of 'cultivated growth' and the consumer ethic are normative and hegemonic. They underpin approaches to development in almost all parts of the world, and also the austerity policies pursued by many governments in response to the economic crises of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Sustainable growth and ethical consumer-citizenship**

Sustainable growth is an increasingly visible and accessible countervailing logic of growth, which attempts to address the detrimental impacts that unchecked economic expansion can have on the physical environment, a problem that is now part of mainstream political debate. For example, in his seminal book *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher (1973) problematised the notion of limitless economic growth. Part of his examination was a forecast of the uneven increase in demand for natural resources (specifically fuel) between wealthy and poor populations globally, which raised the question of whether it was even plausible to assume that a supply was available for the consumption levels he was forecasting. Schumacher's warning, four decades ago, was that the wisest approach was to maintain 'permanence' at the centre of economics. Economic activity could be deemed sensible only as far as its continuance could be assured. Thus, Schumacher argued, there could not be unlimited, widespread growth. One response to these concerns has been the emergence and advocacy of the notion of 'sustainable growth'. Under this logic, governments and concerned consumer-citizens emphasise production and consumption practices, policies and strategies, which facilitate a market in which only environmentally and ethically sound organisations can thrive, thus preventing the worst excesses of unimpeded growth. Growth per se is not necessarily brought into question, as long as it is achieved in an environmentally sustainable manner, such as through the development of eco-efficient technologies that save energy, carbon or other finite resource.

The logic of consumption that is in line with 'sustainable growth' is that of 'ethical consumer-citizenship'. Ethical consumer-citizens aim to leverage their sovereignty to improve the market by forcing businesses to be ethical and socially responsible (e.g. Devinney et al., 2010; Harisson et al., 2005). This is achieved by making consumption choices not on the basis of individual tastes and preferences, but on the basis of ethical and moral principles such as the minimisation of waste, the re-use of products and recyclability. A community ethos resonates in 'ethical consumer-citizenship', as it is through local networks that reduce, re-use and recycle can most easily be achieved and there is an awareness that the actions of the individual impact upon the group. Ethical consumer-citizens consume purposefully to improve the system and their behaviour is a manifestation of their sense of sovereignty and freedom of choice (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006) albeit in a re-purposed manner.

The logic of sustainable growth appears to have been predominantly adopted and promoted by actors who can be seen to gain from maintaining the capitalist-based economic and social order, but who are also under pressure to recognise the unsustainability of 'cultivated growth'. For example, political parties and other bourgeois groups whose legitimacy is tied to addressing environmental damage. This logic is reformist in nature, seeking only to improve the system and to make growth less threatening (Fournier, 2008), rather than to question existing normative attitudes regarding the desirability of growth. This is visible in such acts as Al Gore and David Bloods recent 'Manifesto for Sustainable Capitalism' which presents a 'framework that seeks to maximize long-term economic value by reforming markets to address real needs while integrating environmental, social and governance metrics throughout the [organisational] decision making process' (Gore and Bloods, 2011). Although this may appear an attractive proposition to those who wish to mitigate the destructive nature of unbounded growth, the contradictions inherent in the logic of cultivated growth remain present in notions of 'sustainable growth' and 'ethical consumer-citizenship'. Adopting these ideals could in fact be seen to exacerbate the fundamental concerns (e.g. Littler, 2009) by acting as a palliative yet doing little to address the long term consequences of linking our understanding of social progress to ongoing economic growth.

### **De-growth and post-consumerist citizenship**

De-growth is an emerging countervailing logic which argues that a continued pursuit of growth is an untenable position in a materially finite world (Harvey, 2010) and thus we must develop a system of de-growth (Latouche, 2009). De-growth centres on moving from unsustainable economic growth to a reduction of

growth in financial terms, whilst increasing quality of life and other kinds of wealth. It is about simple living and localisation of production and consumption, as opposed to a globalised economy. In a de-growth society small, self-organised communities would produce and consume what is needed, and the wealth that is produced would not be defined in economic terms, but through quality of life, social relations, equality and justice. Thus, de-growth is not about negative economic growth, but about abandoning the belief in growth and development as the ultimate goals of the economy and society. Achieving this requires a 'virtuous circle of quiet contraction' (Latouche, 2009) involving the systematic realisation of several interdependent goals:

- re-evaluate. The logic of de-growth argues that the values upon which our society is based need to be re-evaluated. In a de-growth society, altruism and co-operation should replace egotism and unbridled competition, the pleasure of leisure and the ethos of play should replace the obsession with work, social life should take precedence over endless consumerism, the local over the global, the appreciation of good craftsmanship over productive efficiency, nature over technology, and so on.
- reconceptualise. The re-evaluation of values allows us to see the world in a different way and we must therefore reconceptualise such concepts as wealth, poverty, and scarcity. For example, as nature is appropriated and commodified by the market in the pursuit of economic growth, natural abundance is transformed into scarcity through the creation of artificial shortages and needs. This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and those natural resources actually become scarce.
- restructure. Production and social relations need to be adapted and restructured according to the reconceptualised values of a de-growth society. The restructure will necessarily be quite radical as the underlying value system has been destabilised.
- redistribute. Restructuring production and social relations automatically means there would be a redistribution of access to resources globally, between the North and South, and locally, between classes, generations and individuals within each society. This will reduce the power of the 'world consumer class' and remove the motivation for conspicuous consumption.
- relocalise. In a de-growth society, production would be on a local basis, according to local needs and resources. The movement of commodities



and capital would be greatly reduced. This is not just an economic issue, but a rediscovery of the local roots of politics, culture and community.

- reduce. Both production and consumption need to be reduced to negate the impact on the environment. The working week would be shortened, in order to provide work for all. This should go hand in hand with flexibility in work to respond to changing local needs and interests. This also then gives citizens time to enjoy the other kinds of wealth a de-growth society would produce, such as creativity, time with family and friends and so on.
- re-use/recycle. Re-use and recycling are fundamental to reducing levels of production and consumption.

The associated logic of post-consumerist citizenship centres on a denial of consumption as a central, meaningful act in and of itself (Soper, Ryle and Thomas, 2009). Of course, consumption is not and cannot be absent in any society, but in a de-growth society the primary focus is social and community participation, rather than consumption. Critics of de-growth claim an inherent contradiction within the logic, which emerges from the view that it is human nature to desire power, and that therefore, such communal, egalitarian forms of society and economy would be impossible to sustain. Post-consumerist citizenship has however been adopted in various social movements and ‘new consumption communities’ where people withdraw as much as possible from the market-place by voluntarily and collectively simplifying their lives (Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2005). The imperative of degrowth is further reflected in various forms of consumer-oriented activism deployed by anarchist movements (Portwood-Stacer, 2012) and has been used as a key political slogan in several anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist spaces, e.g. within the Athenian neighbourhood of Exarcheia (Chatzidakis, Maclaran and Bradshaw, 2012). An increasing number of people are being drawn towards de-growth as a radical alternative to the status quo, despite facing much resistance from those who benefit from current economic systems premised on growth, i.e. owners of capital and those seduced by the promises of capitalism.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

For Castoriadis, one of the key influential thinkers on degrowth, ‘the fetishism of growth is broader than the fetishism of GDP and has deep structural (political–economic) and cultural roots that interconnect the macro level of financial, property or labour institutions to the micro level of individualistic, utilitarian

values and imaginaries' (Castoriadis, 1985, cited in Kallis, 2011: 877). By relating macro-level ideologies of growth to the micro level of everyday consumption, we have three aims in this note. First, we aim to foreground de-growth as a countervailing ideology that is informing and reflected in everyday consumer logics and practices and which should not be conflated with more reformist modes of sustainable and ethical consumption. For instance, whereas de-growth often forms part of the agenda in grassroots-level socio-political struggles the same cannot be said for more conventional forms of green and Fair-Trade consumption. According to Cremin (2012: 57), for example, such models of consumer-citizen activism represent a 'pseudo-individualised quantum of politics proper' that in effect leave the material base of capitalism unaffected. From our perspective, they also reproduce rather than challenge dominant ideologies of growth. To decouple radical forms of consumer-oriented activism from their mainstream counterparts is therefore a necessary condition for the construction of discursive spaces that are more firmly aligned with alternatives to societies of growth.

Second, we believe that the advancement of a degrowth agenda is even more pertinent in the face of 'forced' de-growth taking place in countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain. As Latouche cautions,

sought for degrowth and undergone degrowth are not the same. The second one (recession) leads to crisis, starvations or wars. The first one, or chosen sobriety, means inventing a new society, which will make the world a happier place to live.... (<http://www.degrowth.org/degrowth-whether-you-like-it-or-not>)

Corresponding to such macro-level observations, logics and practices of 'voluntary simplicity' or 'downshifting' (e.g. Shaw and Newholm, 2002) contrast sharply with new types of 'forced' simplicity and downshifting noted at the level of everyday consumption in depression or recession economies. These do not necessarily lead to less materialistic but more fulfilling lifestyles as envisioned in Latouche's work or parallel concepts such as Soper et al.'s (2009) alternative hedonism. They may still provide the impetus for the emergence of new political subjectivities, but they also come along with dramatic falls in standards of living and the anxieties of nearing and falling below the poverty line.

Third, we hope our commentary will provide inspiration for further research at the intersection of everyday consumption logics and practices with the macro context of political economy. For instance, there is scope for research into the ways in which individual actors produce social, rhetorical and theoretical work (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2008) to propagate alternative logics in light of contradictions in the current socio-economic system. Discussion of questions such as whether economic growth is essential for well-being in Parliamentary

contexts (e.g. <http://appgwb-eorg.eventbrite.com/>), for example, would arguably be inconceivable a few years ago. Similarly, the current economic and environment crisis opens up new possibilities for (consumer) action and shapes the context in which opponents of the status quo seek to effect change. This is reflected in the divergence of grassroots and institutional actors involved in the agenda of de-growth:

At first glance, degrowth is an idea that is debated in society, even in the mainstream media, and receives much more support than usually believed if we remain at disinterested political level. There is a constellation of groups and networks explicitly existing for degrowth. Practitioners, activists and researchers act and interact in multiple levels and dimensions. There are minorities in some organizations, like trade unions and political movements (or parties) actively supporting degrowth. There is then a much larger group consisting of people and collectives which both contributed to the rise and conceptualization of the movement and which adopt degrowth as the horizon of their action. (<http://www.degrowth.org/short-history>).

Such ‘cracks’ (Holloway, 2010) are increasingly appearing in the contemporary hegemony of limitless growth and can contain within them the seeds of future socio-political and cultural change.

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