

Degrowth and Educative Deconstruction of the Neoliberal Subject: Alternatives to Build up a Sustainable Society

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Abstract. The paper makes a literary review of degrowth pedagogy. Degrowth has become one of the fundamental approaches posed to survive in a world of limited resources and to face the profound causes of the current crisis. Learning to live better with less turns out to be not a moral postulate but a vital necessity of our species. The paper analyses the current investigations in the field, as well as the relevant publications in 88 peer review articles, focused on degrowth published between 2006 and 2019, including 41 proposals for action, among which 14 are specialized in the field of education. The conclusions point to the urgent and imperative need to change economic and environmental policies, but also mentalities. Decolonising the collective dominant imaginary trapped in consumerism and individualism; educating in a collective and shared lifestyle of voluntary sobriety; deconstructing the productivist reason and adopting an alternative model of eco social future in the unique world we have. The education and the school, as discussed in the paper, has a fundamental role to play in this endeavor.

Keywords: Degrowth · Ecological sustainability · Emancipatory educational research · Environmental education · Critical pedagogy.

Growing continuously, as the capitalism insistently proposes as it were one of its fundamental postulates, is simply impossible in a limited world, like ours, for obvious material constraints [40, 56, 57, 100]. Moreover, the development above a level that meets the basic human needs does not seem to improve the psychological well being [32] and involves a high cost, especially in environmental sustainability [22]. This cost does not only imply that the capitalist economic and social model shears and exhaust the planet exponentially, but it also invalidates the right of future generations to inherit a world with natural resources and future possibilities [2, 67, 89]. It is thus urgent, vitally necessary and ecologically essential, as the “Fridays For Future” movement initiated by Greta Thunberg is demanding [10, 94].

According to these strong material constraints and drawbacks to be overcome, we must learn to live differently. We cannot continue living in a society in

permanent rushing ahead. The sooner we are aware of the need to get rid of an unviable way of life, the better for humanity and for the planet itself.

1 The need to move beyond growth

1.1 Growth takes us to the abyss

The contributions and analysis about the limits of growth, as well as proposal for alternative ways to set up sustainable societies have emerged to a significant extent from ecological economist [22, 23, 41, 81, 82, 99]. In the past years, the economic cyclic crises have rekindled the debate about the growth and the ecological macro economy [21, 52, 56, 59, 61, 75, 80, 97, 98]. According to these analysis, the "growth" economy, proper of the capitalist system, and its social counterpart, the so called "development" society, have not generated real human progress. The growth, far from producing welfare and satisfaction of needs for all humanity, has actually brought about the so called "20/80 society": a few, who are continuously lesser, are much richer, while most of the world population is rushing into the abyss of poverty, exploitation and misery [72]. At the same time, the planet is depleted, plundered in its limited resources and pushed towards an ecological catastrophe that seriously endangers life on Earth and the survival of future generations. We are day after day more aware that our current way of life, based on the growth of production and consumption, drives humanity towards the abyss. But we generally refuse to accept it because the capitalist imaginary has colonized our mental and utopian fantasy. In fact, recovery plans for crises are based on the imperative of increasing growth, productivity, competitiveness, and consumption [52].

As it has been shown from different perspectives, the consumerism and productivism, which is inherent to the capitalist system, needs to be overcome [37, 92]. The constant growth of the economy demanded by capitalism is based on overconsumption, depredation, and waste that leads to a depletion of resources and the deterioration of ecosystems. As long as the capitalist mode of production persists, there will be a manifest conflict between the destruction of nature to obtain benefits and the conservation of nature in order to survive. It is the very bases of the capitalist system and our own form of social and personal life, as established throughout modernity until our times, what is in question. Therefore, the solution needs to be explored beyond the game board in which the dominant economy has been running.

1.2 The alternative is degrowth

It seems reasonable then to admit that the escape from this situation is in the opposite direction to growth, that is, in the "de growth" [20, 41, 65]. A definition repeatedly quoted is "equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term" [89]. André Gorz proposes an alternative definition: "advocating greater wellbeing through the inversion of growth

and the subversion of the prevailing way of life" [43]. It can also be stated that degrowth is a political concept [66, 90], a way of understanding the social, economic and political organization that is radically confronted with the capitalist system in which we are living in, stating that this system is neither the only one nor the best [34, 73, 101]. While the mainstream receipts of political economy, from central and international institutions, take for granted the need for sustained growth as the only rational option, the degrowth movement endorses Paulo Feire's statement "this is not the ways things are, they are simply in this state and we can change it". For this movement, there is another way of doing things, another way of living: to subordinate the market to society, to substitute competition for cooperation, to accommodate the economy to the economy of nature and to sustain basic needs [26, 38, 78]. Degrowth aims at living better with less: less junk food, less stress, less consumer loyalty [62, 77].

But there is no unified understanding of Degrowth. It is an umbrella concept under construction, a space to develop alternative experiences [15, 58, 73, 74]. Furthermore, it is often posed as a constructive target for individuals and groups whose task is filling it with content, to imagine the future society [8, 36]. However, the term should not be misinterpreted as "decrease" [49]. It is not about living in misery, nor renouncing the conquests of science and technology and returning to live using candles for lighting and riding donkeys. These are caricatures that have nothing to do with "degrowth" [19]. Nor is it about orienting towards responsible consumption, but toward non-consumption [53]. It is not about producing ecological cars, that they spend less or that they are less polluting. It is about dismantling the large automotive industry [60]. It is not about doing the same but in less quantity [24].

For the Degrowth movement, it is rather the deliberate option for a new style of life [44], for individuals and communities that put humanist values at the center: close relationships, cooperation, democratic participation, solidarity, critical education, cultivation of the arts, etc. It maximizes the importance of being before having [25], reversing the nefarious popular saying "so much you have, so much you value". It reaffirms instead the confidence that real well-being, happiness, equality between peoples and the preservation of the planet, go through a new way of life in which the crucial thing is growing in values, in particular, the values that have inspired the best achievements of humanity: fraternity, justice, equality, human dignity [9, 55].

1.3 Decolonize the dominant imaginary

The construction of a degrowth society requires not only struggles and actions, but also a systematic strategic approach in the longer term. To this purpose, a profound liberation of mentalities and decolonization of the dominant imaginary needs to be undertaken in the first place [47]. As per Göpel [42], the dominant thinking has colonized our common sense, establishing a direct relationship between economic growth (more production, more consumption) and development, prosperity; understanding that "more" (for instance, a newer, larger, faster car)

is equivalent to "better". Competitiveness has thus become a mantra that is systematically repeated as an article of faith to get out of the recurrent crises. In this sense, degrowth, as a reconsideration of the space of possibilities for the individual and collective decision-making, represents an opportunity to re-politicize a society that has lost trust in the political institutions and processes [7, 27].

In "The German Ideology", Marx already asserted that the ruling class gives a form of universality to its own ideas, presenting them as the only rational and universally valid ones [76]. Likewise, Gramsci argued that the dominant classes exert their power not only through coercion, also by managing to impose their worldview, habits and "common sense" to the dominated classes [45]. Indeed, this ideology of growth has penetrated and shaped the social imaginary, daily life the values that guide our behaviors [63]. This is what Jürgen Habermas has called the colonization of the "Lifeworld" [46]. The ideology of capitalist growth is configured as a device that structures our thinking, our subjectivity, our way of seeing things; drawing a horizon of what is and is not possible, what we can and cannot do, think or imagine. Our reasoning, our thinking, and our imagination are being colonized using the socialization process in which we are immersed through both informal means, mainly the media, and formal means, such as education. Therefore, degrowth requires in the first place reframing the socialization process, reconstructing the educational curriculum, developing content that reveals the authentic economic, social, political and ideological mechanisms of power that build this mentality. As Horkheimer observed, this is a fundamental requirement to set up a different order, in the minds and in the material relations [51].

2 Unveiling the growth imaginary

2.1 The socio-educational production of the neoliberal subject

Laval and Dardot have analyzed the capitalist imaginary in their book entitled "The new way of the world" [69]. According to them, neoliberal globalization is producing, on the one hand, a certain way of life and social relations; on the other, a particular understanding of the world and a social imaginary which is contributing to cement a specific subjectivity linked to the hyperproductive model. The mentality of the people is being transformed through the media the norms and uses that we socialize, but also through the own contents, methodologies and practices that are being developed and transmitted in formal education [3, 79]. This reshaping of subjectivity "forces" everyone to live in a universe of generalized competition, organizing social relations according to the market model and even transforming the person herself, who henceforth is called to conceive and behave like a company, an entrepreneur of herself.

What is striking is that in educational institutions, which have always proclaimed a "false neutrality", their curriculum, organization, methodology, practices, the educational policies that frame them, build a network in tune with the prevailing social system. As Tenti Fanfani analyses [95], these institutional

channels contribute to “civilize” our society, instilling in the population a certain *habitus*: the capitalist *habitus*. A “common sense” has been consensually cast around certain basic issues of the economy, coexistence, society, and politics, which has been built with the collaboration of these institutions or, at least, their complicit silence [28]. The imaginary of productivist capitalism has triumphed and has colonized “common sense” [64]. Thus, the new capitalist subjectivity has been consolidated, where the logic of the market is conceived as the generalized normative logic, from the state to the most intimate subjectivity. This new subjectivity is being learned from school. The ideological battle is at the forefront. The major international and intergovernmental organizations (IMF, WB, WTO, OECD, EU) play a key role in stimulating this model, making entrepreneurship training a priority of education systems in Western countries.

2.2 The remodeling of thought and behavior

The colonization of the subject under the growth ideology entails not only the conversion of the spirits, but also the transformation of behaviors, turning competence into the universal mode of conduct of every person, and transforming social responsibility into individual responsibility. This is, in essence, the function of disciplinary devices, both economic, and socio-cultural that guide people to “govern themselves” under the pressure of competition, in line with the principles of optimizing individual interest.

As Bolívar Botía argues [11], this implies a subjective introjection mechanism, in the sense referred to by Michael Foucault, through which guiltiness is internalized as to say: “if I do not have work it is because I am not entrepreneurial enough”. In this new technology of the self, the social problem of employment scarcity is internalized and assumed as a personal disability problem. Paradoxically, the exploited becomes an exploiter of herself. The one who fails is doubly failed because she tries to persuade herself that she is guilty of her failure. Thus, each person has been compelled to conceive herself and to behave, in all the dimensions of her existence, as a bearer of an individual talent-capital that she must know how to constantly grow it.

2.3 Learning to be “a self-exploiting company”

According to the Berliner philosopher Byung-Chul Han [48], the first step in the colonisation of mentalities is the creation of the “self-optimizing subject”. This subject seeks to maximize individual interest, in a framework of interested and competitive relationships between individuals. The purpose of the human being becomes the will to realize oneself before others. The company thus becomes not only a general model to be imitated, but it also shapes a new *ethos* that must be embodied through surveillance applied to oneself. This ethos is reinforced and verified through evaluation procedures. The first commandment of the entrepreneur’s ethic is “help yourself” [69].

It seeks, above all, to work on oneself to permanently transform oneself, to improve oneself, to become increasingly effective in achieving results and returns.

This is what Han refers to as "self-exploitation", which pervades the logic of the common sense [48]. The new paradigms, "lifelong training" and "employability", are its most significant strategic modalities pervading the educational landscape.

Different techniques, such as coaching, neurolinguistic programming (NLP), transactional analysis and multiple procedures linked to a school or a guru, have as a goal a better self-control of the subjects emotions, and stress. Their general objective is a reinforcement of the self, its better adaptation to reality.

2.4 The moral of the "free" choice in education

A new moral establishes the "obligation to choose" as the only "logical rule of the game" of life, governed by the rules of the market. Thus, each person assumes the need to optimize own interest in order to increase personal capital in a universe where accumulation seems the generalized law of existence and, at the same time, the horizon of employability and survival. This logic is the horizon of neoliberal strategies to promote "freedom of choice", which actually hides a selection based on personal interest [28]. Choosing between the most advantageous offers and maximizing their own individual interest is one of the basic principles. It is not, for example, to demand that all people have access to the best educational centers, but to select the best possible one for "myself", which provides the best possibilities to compete with others and get the best advantages.

In coherence to this moral setting, the state strengthens competition in existing markets and create a competition where it does not yet exist, financing private options for educational centers and expanding the possibility of "free choice". In the same line, several systems have been implemented, such as the "educational check" through which schools are no longer directly financed according to their needs; instead, a check is given to each consumer corresponding to the average cost of schooling and it is the individual who must "choose" the school center to be assigned. Hence, it is about weighting between different possibilities and choosing the best opportunity. The public space is thus constructed following the model of the "global shopping center" [28].

2.5 Technologies to maximize the advantages in the market of the competition

Through these means, families are transformed into "school consumers" that seek to maximize their opportunities, introducing competition among school establishments in the struggle to achieve a high position in the rankings; generating school management by performance and objectives; and even pushing the teachers to compete among each other. Competition thus becomes a way of internalizing the demands of profitability while introducing disciplinary pressure in the intensification of work, the shortening of deadlines, the individualization of wages, reducing all collective forms of solidarity in the educational communities [50].

This disciplinary strategy is escorted by the expansion of a whole "evaluative technology", understood as a measure of performance and effectiveness. Given

that the more "free" you choose in the market, the more you need to know the "quality" of the products you offer in order to increase your earnings and compete with more opportunities of success in the jungle of the competition of everyone against each other. Accountability, as a form of evaluation based on measurable results, has become the main means to guide behaviors, encouraging individual "performance".

The beginning of this ideological war has been the questioning of the public and the criticism of the state as the source of all waste and constraint of prosperity. According to the growth imaginary, public services support irresponsibility; they block the indispensable impetus of individual competition; the unemployment subsidy and social assistance keep people dependent on the state; education gratuity pushes vagrancy.

Even worse, the welfare state policy demoralizes and retracts the poor to improve themselves, promotes the shrinking of responsibility, discourages them from studying, seeking work. It makes them opt for leisure which leads them to lose dignity and self-esteem. Accordingly, there is only one rational solution: the suppression of the welfare state and the revival of charity of the family and the neighborhood, forcing individuals to assume their responsibilities to avoid dishonor.

2.6 Turning victims into guilty

According to the aforementioned analyses [11, 28, 30, 48], the economic problems are reduced to psychic problems linked to insufficient self-control and the relationship with others. This "philosophy of freedom" allocates the responsibility of fulfilling the objectives solely on the individual. Han explains how in the society of tiredness, instead of the alienation and exploitation of others, we live a voluntary self-exploitation [48]. In this society of neoliberal performance, man has become a *laborans* animal, "executioner and victim of itself", thrown into a terrible horizon: failure. The exploitation by others is internalized: "the exploitation of itself is more efficient than that of others because it is linked to the idea of freedom" [48]. The current emphasis on entrepreneurship makes subjects to "self-exploit" and, at the same time, "you can take yourself as free". Thus, this form of exploitation is also much more efficient and productive because the individuals voluntarily decide to exploit themselves to exhaustion, generating depressed, tired individuals.

This new society of individual risk is a field of opportunities for the most varied proposals of private protection and security. An immense security market has developed proportionally to the weakening of collective solidarity insurance mechanisms, thus reinforcing, through a loop effect, the sensation of risk and the need to protect oneself individually. In this context of risk, many social rights are reinterpreted as individual choices of personal protection. This is the case, for example, of education and vocational training, considered as shields that protect against unemployment and increase "employability".

The new subject, cast under these principles, is the human being of competition and performance, a being made to succeed, to win. "We are the champions",

such is the anthem of the new subject, escorted by a silent warning: there is no place for losers. Conformism becomes suspect because the subject is forced to "transcend". Success becomes the supreme value. The will to succeed is the meaning of life.

The paradox is that, once it has been accepted to enter into this logic, the conflict is delegitimized and there can no longer place for real protest since the subject has carried out what was expected to do through self-imposed coercion. What is thus radically transformed is the definition itself of the political subject, making neoliberal reason a true world-reason.

What is striking is that this neoliberalist imaginary denies itself as an ideology, because it is considered "reason" itself. "Modernity" and "effectiveness" are not proper of right- or left-wings, according to the formula of those who "do not do politics". In short, the great ideological victory of neoliberalism has consisted of "de-ideologizing" the policies it carries out, to such an extent that they should no longer be even discussed. In this vein, the great achievement of neoliberalism has been the production of the neoliberal subject or *neo-subject*. As Max Weber made it clear, it is easier to escape from prison than to get out of rationality, since this supposes liberating oneself from a system of norms established by means of a profound internalization process.

3 Building up degrowth educational alternatives

3.1 Deconstruct formal education

As we have seen above, bringing about a different order through educational pathways entails avoiding in the curriculum the exaltation of growth [12,42] and introducing the consideration of the biospherical limits, which is currently missing. At the same, critical contents about our way of production and consumption and alternative experiences-showing that living well with less is possible-need to be introduced [6]. Simultaneously, the learners need to be equipped with strategies and tools that enable them to analyze critically the social environment in which they are immersed, including the advertising, media, films, commercial music, fashion, etc. Therefore, it is about introducing transversally a degrowth pedagogy in education [86].

It also entails mainstreaming the philosophy of simplicity [87], of a sober life, in order to learn how to reduce and limit desires, but also needs (from the possibility of living without television to getting used to being transported by bicycle). Voluntary sobriety [87] means adopting a lifestyle that can be universalized to the entire planet. To this end, the functional dynamics of schools need to set an example by substantially reducing consumption, breaking the model of programmed obsolescence, repairing, recycling and reusing the materials and technologies of the center; questioning unnecessary consumption and advertising, etc. In short, educating for "living better with less" [35].

It is also about promoting a "slow education", where the rhythms of maturation are taken into account, where the development of the learning process

takes priority and the effort is focused on facilitating the strategies for critical reflection, in depth analysis, cooperative work, compared to the traditional model of evaluating results, memorize for continuous exams, advance the agenda accumulating content, taken for learned what is presented in class. This trend also implies reducing the intensification of work of the centers, the "duties for home", the extracurricular activities with the purpose of working more calmly, more deeply, allocating time for reflection, contemplation, enjoyment, relationship; and recapturing personal time, to be devoted to other activities that help us to realize ourselves: participation in the neighborhood, associative life, cultural development, commitment to social movements, etc.

The reframing concerns also organization and management, based on: participatory democracy [83,91]; participatory budgets [14]; involvement of the entire educational community as an assembly, exercising the right to decide the distribution of educational resources; the negotiation and agreement of the rules of coexistence and relationship in the center through assemblies and debates that generate a form of strong democratic dialogical participation, building authentic "schools of democracy"; the design of learning communities through active participation in a community that learns jointly and collectively, with a vision of justice and human rights, engaged in social and collective change [31]. Obviously, to build up this model of degrowth education, it coherently needs to practice what it preaches. Thus, it ought to go beyond the capitalist values and imaginary.

3.2 Construction of alternative subjectivization

The only practical way for schools and teaching staff is to promote forms of subjectivization alternative to the model of self-entrepreneurship [1], declining the education to conduct oneself as a company, both for oneself and others, according to the norm of competition. This means refusing to enroll students in the career of performance, establishing instead real cooperation relationships, sharing in a context of a commitment to degrowth.

As proposed by Enriquez and Pando [33], the implication of the entire educational community in the insubordination and resistance to this neoliberal model that advances in the school ideology can be a good example of an attitude that paves the way to a new class of cooperation practices and behaviors consistent with the approaches of degrowth.

The practices of sharing knowledge, of creating networks of learning communities, mutual assistance and support between centers; the rejection of repetition, revalidation and segregation in learning pathways; the empowerment of cooperative work with repercussions on the centre's social environment and the involvement in networks of social and solidarity economy with the students; the relocation of our production and our relations; the reuse of our shared time in solidarity and altruism, etc., can sketch another world rationality. This alternative reason cannot be better called than "reason of the commons". Its educational counterpart "teach to decrease", but also requires a step further, generating educational policies under the degrowth model.

3.3 The need to recover the ideals of humanistic education

In terms of the global educational agenda, the traditional role of education as a public right, aimed at building up a participatory, supportive and open citizenship, is losing weight under the increasing pressure of the market economy criteria-competitiveness, performance, benefits-which are modelling the prototype of a more individualistic and consumerist citizenship [96].

Accordingly, the current discussion in the field of educational no longer focuses on how to develop an emancipatory education, based on a vital development of the students that guarantees full citizenship, a real participation in the construction of a fairer society, but, instead, in a curriculum according to the labour market aimed at increasing international competitiveness and profits. The essential task no longer seems to be the "production" of "reasonable human beings", people capable of judging and deciding reasonably, critically and rigorously, but that of providing professionally qualified waged workers adapted to the demands of the industry and service sector. In fact, investments in education and curricula are designed by the demands of economic growth and as a contribution to the business competitiveness of national industries. The ideal of humanistic education has been broken apart in the neoliberal era.

Students are not expected to devote their time to futile studies, to knowledge that simply contributes to a personal intellectual or cultural enrichment, to knowledge that allows them to analyze better the history and laws of the economy or society in which they live, to capacities that develop the individual artistic sense, the desire to write or to engage with social causes. Now, as already recommended in 1997 by the European Council meeting in Amsterdam, it is a question of "giving priority to the development of professional and social skills for a better adaptation of workers to the evolution of the labor market".

According to Laval [68], knowledge is reinterpreted in the jargon of "competences"; the school program is redefined as a sum of adequate "competencies"; the great evaluation programs also appeal to this notion inviting governments to judge and correct the educational systems based on it. This method is part of a pedagogical standardization that taylorises teaching with efficiency criteria, transforming education into a market and schools into factories of "competences".

These changes, similar in different countries and continents [29], do not mean a reform of education, but a reconversion. In this way, education is becoming a consumer product, a precious asset that confers individual competitive advantage in the hard struggle for social promotion: the more certificates accumulated, and the higher the economic cost (better if it is in a private center, and even better if it is an expensive master, etc.), the more individual advantage in the meritocratic career for obtaining the future job. The aim is turning education into a private matter for consumers who choose according to their resources, which profoundly reframes the social role of education.

Far from being a right enjoyed by all people, given their status as citizens, education must be established as an opportunity offered to entrepreneurs, the "responsible" consumers, in the sphere of a flexible and dynamic market (the school market). Besides, by these means, the responsibility for school success

or failure (which is no longer collective, but individual) is transferred to the "clients" themselves, since they are the ones who choose.

In this context as per Apple's analysis [5], the schools try to become more selective, since accepting students that cause sinking in the ranking of the centers impacts on their global position in the market. Students with 'educational needs' or minorities are not only "costly", but they reduce the scores in those classification tables, "damaging" the "public image" of the center. This represents a subtle, but crucial, shift in emphasis from the needs of the student to the needs of the school and from what the school does for the student to how much the student does for the school.

3.4 Insubordination and resistance to the productivist reason

Consequently, the degrowth education alternative intends to break the productivist reason that permeates all the educational reforms undertaken worldwide, sponsored by international financial organizations [8], developing a new educational policy and curriculum agenda [39,88]. It poses, analyzing in the first place to the service of whom are the current policies and curriculums been designed, who they favor and what kind of society are they contributing to building up [18].

It is that the "freedom of creation" of centers, by companies or religious corporations, financed with public money, to select certain students and train them for "excellence", becomes an exception and not the norm, as it happens now. It is about imposing a retreat of private interests and the ideology of business management that currently colonize education, developing a public school, with public ownership, management and financing, which guarantees education under equal conditions for all citizens, especially those who have less possibilities of obtaining it in another way, guaranteeing the right that each and every one has to achieve the maximum level of education, and educating in a common project of citizenship. It is, in short, to transform the educational system itself in terms of proposals consistent with degrowth that radically questions the academic capitalism of school productivity. It is about conceiving education as a space for learning, reflection and argumentation that gives rise to other possible ways of conceiving the world and building it collectively, from a post-capitalist and eco-feminist perspective [13, 84, 85], which takes into account the proposals of good-living from the global South [16, 17, 93].

Critical education for degrowth [54, 70, 71] understands that every educational process is a form of political intervention in the world and may be able to create the possibilities for social transformation [4]. Before seeing education as a technical practice, we must understand education as a moral and political practice under the premise that learning is not only focused on the processing of the knowledge received, but on its transformation in the broader struggle for social rights and justice. Education is inseparable from life, from the social and political model that we want to build and defend.

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