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BOOK REVIEW

In defense of degrowth. Opinions and minifestos, by Giorgos Kallis, edited by Aaron Vansintjan, published in Creative Commons Attribution (www.indefenseofdegrowth.com), 2017, 219 pp.

Doughnut economics. Seven ways to think like a 21st century economist, by Kate Raworth, London, Penguin/Random House, 2017, viii + 372 pp., £14.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781847941381

Almost two years after the COP21 agreement in Paris, the list of local and global catastrophes associated with CO₂ emissions and other negative “externalities” of the current economic system has only increased, nor there is any sign of carbon trading being a successful strategy for tackling climate change. These two books offer different paths for devising a better strategy. Giorgos Kallis’ *In Defense of Degrowth* is a collection of short essays, commentaries and speeches addressing various aspects of *degrowth*, a concept that has been circulating in radical intellectual networks and movements in Europe since the 1970s, and that Kallis himself, together with a group of colleagues at the Universitat Autònoma in Barcelona, has greatly contributed to revive in recent years. For those who may not have come across this concept yet, *degrowth* signifies “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions” (p. 10). This vision is supported by the idea that unlimited GDP growth is not only anti-ecological but also anti-social (i.e. its social costs are not compensated by its social benefits), and its infinite perpetuation only serves the interests of capitalism.

In Defense of Degrowth comes after a very popular *degrowth* dictionary co-authored by Kallis with Giacomo D’Alisa and Federico Demaria in 2014,¹ now translated in various languages, and also after a number of scientific articles and international conferences that have gathered thousands of academics and activists in the past 10 years.² The book is divided into seven parts: the first four are devoted to establish the theoretical and cultural contours of the *degrowth* concept as a radical form of environmentalism, showing its potentialities in politicising academic debates and in overcoming economic and political orthodoxies – including those within the Left. Fiercely against ecological modernisation and its technocratic vision, *degrowth* is described by Kallis as an anti-capitalist approach to ecological sustainability. Its focus is a radical shift in the dominant economic ideology and social imaginary: from growth to redistribution of the surplus, from production to reproduction and care, and from acquisitive to sharing and commoning values. As such, *degrowth* should be fully embraced by the Left, Kallis argues, abandoning once and for all the productivist and Keynesian credos which the climate crisis has made obsolete. Latin American countries such as Ecuador or Bolivia have allegedly embraced *degrowth* in the form of Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay principles, only to abandon them in practice in favour of “real-politik and growth-based redistributive politics (which) dictated that capital be accommodated and the economy be fuelled by extractivism” (p. 33). Here Kallis hints at a crucial problem with the *degrowth* vision, touching upon one of his key claims: *degrowth* is not only about grassroots alternative economic practices (*nowtopias*) but also about institutional reform and occupying the State. It seems to me the failure of Correa and Morales to keep up with the principles of Buen Vivir represents a macroscopic problem for such vision, one which would deserve a much more in-depth analysis.

The fifth part of the book offers a number of policy proposals with respect to the current economic crisis in southern Europe, articulating the *degrowth* perspective as an alternative to neoliberal austerity measures, geared on two core sets of policies: the reduction of working hours and the enhancement of the commons. In the sixth part, Kallis responds to a number of friendly critics of *degrowth*,

whose interventions are also featured in the section. In the seventh part, the *degrowth* perspective is applied to detailed discussions of the Greek case.

Part Six, titled *Conversations*, includes – among others – a commentary from Kate Raworth and Kallis' response to it: it thus offers a good basis for a combined review of the two books. We could divide the critiques presented here into two broad groups, the other including detailed objections to this or that claim about *growth* and *degrowth*, one questioning the term *degrowth* itself, and/or its strategical function in current climate politics. Raworth's commentary belongs to the second group and is supported by a reference to the work of linguist George Lakoff: "Never accept the right's frames – don't negate them, or repeat them, or structure your arguments to counter them. That just activates their frames in the brain and helps them" (p. 180). Like Kallis, I am not convinced by this claim: we do not need to say *degrowth* to have the notion of *growth* activated in our brain, it is already active by default. Saying *degrowth* helps to deactivate it instead, or at least to realise it is there and question it. True, what we want is not *degrowth* per se but something positive like, for example, the "good living", so why not say that directly? But to achieve the "good living", we need to get rid of GDP growth policies which take us in the opposite direction. Economic policies and the public discourse in general, especially in times of crisis, obsessively repeat the need for GDP growth, perpetuating social addiction to it, so it becomes necessary to say *no* to that. That said, this particular critique of *degrowth* serves as a useful reminder that concentrating our energies towards dismantling the *growth* mantra – by replacing it with a *degrowth* mantra perhaps? – may become equally obsessive and ultimately counterproductive. As Raworth notes, thrown into a conversation, the term often creates confusion and mistaken assumptions and thus it is "not an effective advocacy strategy for change" (p. 179).

Raworth's strategy for change, which is now described in her *Doughnut Economics*, consists in drawing an image of the goals of economic policy (a revolutionary act, since neoclassical economics has long stripped itself of any mention of social ends): this is the image of the doughnut, i.e. the "safe and just space for humanity" which lays beyond deprivation and within planetary boundaries. Using this image as an orientating metaphor, the author then goes on to draw alternative representations of economic discourse, while also pointing to alternative economic policies, either already existing or possible, and showing how they can drive humanity into the doughnut. For example, chapter two replaces Samuelson's circular flow diagram, typically used in economics textbooks to depict the macroeconomy, with an embedded economy picture, featuring three concentric circles (earth, society and – at the inner level – economy) communicating with each other via energy and material flows. Notably, the economy circle is made of four sections: households, market, commons and the state. By redesigning the macroeconomy this way, the previous fixation with money as the only measure of wealth is replaced by a broader understanding of what actually makes economic activities work, and at what real cost.

Confronting the two books, it becomes clear that they have a lot in common. All seven ways of redrawing the economy in "doughnut" terms have been or would be embraced by *degrowth* advocates; moreover, four of them are explicit rejections of the *growth* paradigm. Raworth concurs with most *degrowth* advocates in claiming that infinite GDP growth is globally unacceptable, whereas some temporary and limited form of it is still necessary in order to tackle extreme poverty regionally. When it comes to the *growth/degrowth* controversy, however, she notes – rightly so, to my view – that this has assumed almost religious contours: a slippery path that she opposes with pragmatic agnosticism. Her polemical target is not economic *growth* per se, but the economic science orthodoxy that has turned it into an undisputable social necessity, one graphic representation at a time. Change the way economics is thought and taught – the book suggests – and an entirely new world of possibilities will open up, one where there will be no more addiction to GDP.

Raworth's book is largely about metaphors and images as the most effective means of communicating meanings. After reading it, I could not help thinking about the contrasts between the doughnut metaphor, with its "slow" advocacy strategy, and that of the "missile word" originally launched by Serge Latouche to define *degrowth*, and enthusiastically embraced by Kallis and colleagues. My

preference immediately goes to the doughnut true, the *degrowth* missile conveys a sense of righteous attack against an economic discourse which is responsible for harming people and the planet; but missiles – no matter how intelligent – provoke a war imaginary where people fear that more will be lost than necessary. Other *degrowth* metaphors – the image of an elephant-turning-snail, or the confluence of different streams³ – are more apt to convey a sense of the term's meaning and purposes. My favourite is that of *degrowth* is an “umbrella term”,⁴ gathering a variety of social movements which have steered away from the *growth* mantra. Umbrellas offer protection against outside elements (rain or sun), and so they are useful, good means to create safe spaces that people can share. In a world constantly hit both by the heavy rains of ecological degradation, impoverishment, austerity measures, and by the implacable heat of overconsumption, overproduction and the financialisation of everything, opening an umbrella and creating a space for different movements to converge and talk about (or practice) the alternatives that they want is exactly what the *degrowth* term has been doing in the past decade, especially in Europe.

But the umbrella metaphor also gives us a sense of the limits of the *degrowth* idea: offering shelter against the system is a means to imagine and practise alternatives. The goal, as Raworth points out, is something else, whose definition is still vague and controversial. She proposes to call it “the doughnut” – a metaphor that suggests how human well-being can only exist within limits that are both social and ecological. Kallis seems to be leaning towards ecosocialism – also my personal preference – though this is not a concept that many understand or are willing to embrace. (Could the doughnut become a good metaphor for it?) Some now prefer *Buen Vivir*, while others – probably the majority – still think “sustainability” is a good enough signifier, even better when stripped of its contested companion “development”. Kallis claims that, convincingly, these notions are too vague and consensual to mean anything in practice; we all claim to want “sustainability”, but what makes a difference is the means by which we want to get at it. If we say that green growth (or carbon trading) is a means to sustainability, then we are being hypocritical, because we know that this is not going to happen – a point on which Raworth and Kallis agree, though with different languages. In a passionate moment of the debate, Kallis equates environmental economists with capitalists, and himself with Karl Marx, claiming that he would not want to be at the same table with them.

Nevertheless, the problem of creating a shared political vision capable of aggregating not only radical intellectuals but a large coalition of social forces is a non-trivial one – as I have argued elsewhere.⁵ Most economists and politicians, as well as other strategic sectors of civil society (trade-unions, charities, professional associations, independent media, etc.), claim to believe in the “green growth”, or at least “sustainable development” tale; and yet, they are not automatically capitalists, and more importantly, the people who follow them are not capitalists either, for the larger part. They simply represent the accepted common sense, and they are trapped not just within mental frames but within powerful material frames – from scientific orthodoxy and academic success to electoral politics and coalition building, and from occupational blackmail and consumer debt to growth-fuelled social welfare and funding schemes. Throwing the *degrowth* missile against them is likely to have uncertain results: some will be convinced; many others will remain sceptical or get defensive.

The “doughnut economics” follows a different strategy. Focusing on the goals to be achieved by humanity as a whole, it clearly identifies a (broadly speaking) political subject, i.e. the next generation of economists, and challenges them to devise the right means by which those ends can be achieved. True, few of those economists will accept the challenge, but they might actually come up with answers which – no matter how radical – have a better chance to be socially accepted. The problem with this strategy, one might object, is that global capitalism has not resulted from intellectual design – rather the opposite: mainstream economic science as we know it has been shaped by the interplay of material and politico-economic forces, and serves the needs of economic power. Taking a pencil to redraw the economy is a powerful metaphor only if it is seen as part of a broader agency, where the pencil serves to better represent the real world with its diversity of economic practices and political subjectivities. In short, the question is: to what extent can doughnut economics help put an end to capitalism and replace it with a better system? The answer, to my

view, resides in its capacity to generate a mutually reinforcing feedback with society, inspiring economic policies that give expression to already existing anti-capitalist praxes, and thus creating the conditions for them to expand and take over “the economy”. Given the enormous political relevance of economic science, this is a good place where to exercise leverage upon the system, taking advantage of and further widening the cracks that have been already opened in the real world.

To conclude, reading these two books together gives a clear sense that *degrowth* and *doughnut economics*, as well as other radical concepts that they incorporate (environmental justice, Buen Vivir, community economies, and others), are *not* engaged in a battle of ideas against each other in the same fashion as different currents of Marxism were used to. The point is not to pick the right one, but rather to make use of them as different tools to create a global political strategy for tackling climate change – one that a majority of the world population might identify with and struggle for.

Notes

1. D’Alisa, G., Demaria, F., and Kallis, G. 2014. *Degrowth: a vocabulary for a new era*. London: Routledge.
2. An essential bibliography and list of past conferences can be found at: <https://degrowth.org/>
3. See Demaria, F., *et al.*, 2013 What is degrowth? From an activist slogan to a social movement. *Environmental Values*, 22, 191–215.
4. See Chertkovskaya, E. and Paulsson, A. The growthocene: thinking through what degrowth is criticising. Available from: <https://entitleblog.org/2016/02/19/the-growthocene-thinking-through-what-degrowth-is-criticising/>
5. Barca, S. In press. The labor(s) of degrowth. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.

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