

Degrowth Conference: KASVU MURROKSESSA

Helsinki, Finland

24th September 2010

Comment on Key Note lecture by Serge Latouche

MIDDLE-CLASS THERAPY OR POLITICAL STRUGGLE

Thank you prof. Latouche for your important contribution here today and during many years. Let me use my few minutes to do three things.

I will record some points of agreement and, if you permit, community, with you. Second, I will recapitulate some observations that I consider particularly important. Third, I will put some questions, indicating also my criticism or a sense, possibly of divergence between our perspectives.

1. The political necessity of degrowth

Gandhi said: "The world has enough for everyone's needs but not enough for even one man's greed." Conceptually I have some problems with the notion of "limits to growth": limits to growth of what one can always ask? - But I grew up reading the report from the Club of Rome as a young teenager in 1972 and during the next years I gained my activist identity in the Nordic environment movement.

We did not want to have anything to do with Soviet-style leftism and social-democratic or liberal growth optimism and their old and tired parties and institutions. We were inspired by Gandhi, the Norwegian environmentalists and the hippies, we listened to Sex Pistols, squatted houses and enjoyed radical life-style experiments, calling ourselves *the alternative movement*. We always found it self-evident that it is IGC - Industrious Growth Society - that is the problem and that communism and capitalism are therefore just two different varieties of the same pathological, modern, western civilisation.

Right or wrong, I look to you as representing in the overall attitude and content of your talk a French variation of the themes and political identity that was formative of the movement that I grew up. More importantly, I look to you as sharing with me the fate that what you learnt early and what I learnt slightly later - that we still look at the global crisis of development and the global environmental crisis as symptoms of a deeper civilisational crisis. By this I mean above all this. We agree, as I believe, that *the great problems of our times can not be solved if we think primarily of finding new means, better technologies and better institutions etc., for dealing with them*. We think that we need to give up some cultural goals that have seemed vital to us and replace them with new ones. And we agree that this civilisational change that is a physical necessity comes with the great hope that it will give us, rich and poor alike, a vast improvement of our lives.

This is the political identity, diagnosis and task which I think makes us part of the same world-wide community of searching and struggling citizens.

2. Highlights - short list

Let me now briefly list some concepts, topics and perspectives that you offer that I find to be particularly helpful and that are too often neglected or not observed at all:

* Scarcity is in an important sense a modern invention. Scarcity is a perspective on things that defines mainstream modern economic thinking. Scarcity has other senses too - malnutrition for instance is not a social construction - but the political semantics of scarcity is much more ominous than is usually understood.

* It is useful and liberating to compare the impact of modern economic thinking on us, on how we think and conceive the world, with the impact of totalitarianism.

* It is important that we see how degrowth is *not* a programme of "giving up". We are *not* proposing that people who now are well off and happy should abstain from what is good in their lives for some higher purpose. Degrowth promises a better life for all. *There is nothing psychologically unrealistic about degrowth.*

* Localisation is essential to degrowth. Degrowth as concrete action and as new social and political realities will come in many forms.

* The concept "societies in transition" that has been applied to Central and Eastern European countries after the disintegration of the Soviet Union is the right term to describe what is, or should be, happening in what many now called the "advanced" or "developed" or "leading" Western countries.

* The emphasis on the politics of time, including on the need to liberate many of us from addiction to work that has only instrumental value for us.

* The stress on the possibilities that local currencies open up.

* The emphasis on farming ("paysanne") agriculture as opposed to industrialised, large-unit agriculture

3. Criticism and questions

I want to raise here only one issue. I find it vastly important but a little bit difficult to summarise. I will therefore indicate my worry by putting a few pointed remarks.

* Is what you say just middle class therapy?

You have nice enemies and present nice values. You give us all an easy chance to see ourselves as heroes on your story. Your political programme, with the many charming R's - Re-this and Re-that, has a lot of appeal.

But your programme is only is list of abstract goals. It says far too little about how to bridge the gap between current realities and the world we want.

We will not realise degrowth unless we take day-today political work seriously. We need to identify obstacles to our goals. And we need to use old and create new instruments, political tools, that will take us from the dead-end of today to the various forms of degrowth society that we need.

Perhaps you will say that my criticism comes too early. Your paper is short and you have more to say. But is that explanation sufficient? Or can we, even regardless of your persona credentials, see in your paper and in the global degrowth movement, a kind of moral laziness, a sloppy middle-class reluctance, where we leave the dirty work of the everyday to others who are less pure and idealistic than we are?

To change society we must realise that there are real, active political forces that we must struggle against. The most important of these today is probably corporate power and the strange and frightening post-national fusion of capitalism and bureaucratic rule. Also racism and patriarchy must be mentioned.

In order to change the world we must struggle, non-violently, with as much might as we can. That is not something we achieve by only working less and valuing the right things. It is a question of a lot of hard work and of getting your hands dirty in the world of second best choices and in the difficult but necessary and very anti-individualistic politics of building large alliances.

We must also remember that localisation will not happen unless we can mobilise democratically to use state power as a tool to enable the transition we want and to protect the localisation that we need.

We need good values and the inspiring vision of a plural multitude of degrowth societies in solidarity with each other. But a combination of Gandhian satyagraha, world-wide solidarity with mass movements that struggle for land rights for the oppressed, and socialdemocratic "Realpolitik" is also necessary. Otherwise we will indulge in self-congratulatory therapy that will not bring the change we need.

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