

Degrowth vs. sustainable development: how to open the space of ontological negotiation?¹

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Abstract

On the basis of a comparison between the discourses on 'sustainable development' and those on 'degrowth', the paper shows how degrowth reveals the limits of sustainable development understood as a space of negotiation. By contrast to sustainable development, degrowth exhibits the specific ontology of sustainable development, and goes against the pretension of sustainable development to be a universal solution to our contemporary and global problems. Still, in the majority of texts, the ontology promoted by degrowth remains implicit. The second part of the paper is then devoted to the elucidation of this ontology in order to begin to enter into the ontological negotiation. Through the clarification of the needed ontology, a secondary aim of the paper is to make some elements of the debate around "décroissance" in French texts available for the English-speaking public.

1. Introduction

'Sustainable development' and 'degrowth' are not well-defined terms, for different reasons. The term 'sustainable development' has been coined at the highest international level to open a space of negotiation and to convene a series of actors — corporations, NGOs, scientists, trade-unions, governments, etc. — in order to launch discussions over the question of the relationships between development and environment. Sustainable development is not a project of society, nor a concept. It belongs to the category of terms that are clear at the abstract level (e.g. peace, justice, equity), these ends upon which everybody agrees, but which are difficult to be implemented. The plasticity of the term 'sustainable development' is precisely the key of its success: each actor can take it and give it the coloration and interpretation s/he wants. This key opens a space of negotiation.

The term 'degrowth' is, on the other hand, overall polemical and has been coined to prompt debates about the same question (environment and development) though radicalised: the current development, based on ever-lasting growth, is incompatible with the limited carrying capacity of the Earth (www.decroissance.org, Latouche 2006, Flipo 2007). Degrowth takes as motto the quotation attributed to

Boulding: "Anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist." Degrowth takes thus sides *against* all-pervading discourses asserting the need of an economic growth. From this perspective, "sustainable development is a semantic weapon in order to evacuate the dirty word 'ecology'" (Kempf 2007, p.33)

As a method to analyse this contrast, I will take a constructivist point of view about sustainable development and degrowth. Taken here as actants of discourses, *sustainable development* and *degrowth* (in italics) are analysed as substantives, as nouns that play certain roles in texts and narratives. *Sustainable development* and *degrowth* have both performative effects: the former opens a space of negotiation, the latter challenges the way this space is functioning. We will see that these actants are entrenched in different ontologies and yield to different effects. The use of current discourses allows making a distinction between the original texts (e.g. Brundtland Report) and how actants are creating real effects.

The constitution of an ontology proceeds through inclusions and exclusions. An ontology is made of beings and relations, or alternatively of entities and forces. Forces explain the manner entities are linked and how space is striated. Descola (2006) explains that ontology is a system of "distribution of property" to this or that existing objects, plants, animals, people. Each ontology is a distribution of natures and cultures. Beings or entities happen as actors in discourses or on public scenes. Actors can be individuals or groups, human or non-human. So, problems are for not acknowledged nor hierarchised in the same way in *sustainable development* and *degrowth*. Both are mobilising ethical and ecological arguments, in different ways. They oppose on the kind of grip to get on the natural world and on its management. The universality of development, knowledge and actors that should be mobilised, the question of well-being, the place of the economics and its institutionalisation, notably the power delegated to the market, are some of the many points of disagreement between both discourses.

The question I would like to raise in contrasting *sustainable development* with *degrowth* concerns the limits of the classic negotiation and how *degrowth* could or not make the negotiation becoming *ontological*, namely to help thinking of a negotiation that would also concern the negotiators' being. The first hypothesis is that ontology is correlative of politics: the hierarchisation of beings and their attributes is a way to decide on the mode of government. The second hypothesis is that negotiation is desirable if one acknowledges that there is no *a priori* good manner to select beings that are important for a given problem (Stengers 1996-97, Latour 2004). In other words, hierarchisation of beings has to be negotiated.

The ontology of *sustainable development* has been developed, elaborated and temporally crystallised. What does *sustainable development* call forth and represent as entities? How are forces distributed, brought together, translated in the spaces of negotiation? What is the current ontology of *sustainable development*?

2. Creating spaces of negotiation

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Sustainable development is first and foremost a key to open a space of negotiation. This concept was coined to convene a series of actors - business, NGOs, scientists, unions, governments, etc.. - around the same table to begin a discussion on topics urgent and global. At first view, nobody can contest the Brundtland definition: "sustainable development is a development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". *Sustainable development* was conceived in the spheres of international dialogue to meet the challenges of long-term, continued problems related to the degradation of the environment and ecosystems. The emergence of *sustainable development* is also concomitant with the convergence of a global movement of NGOs. It is the introduction of this new type of actor in the process of international negotiations that gives its novelty to the *sustainable development*. *Sustainable development* has helped push the institutionalization of a series of civil society organizations, within various organs of dialogue and negotiation, and at different levels - international, national, regional and local. It is therefore not surprising to see the difficulty in defining sustainable development, meet so many different versions of sustainable development, and in particular depending on the type of actor. The plasticity of the term allows everyone to add it colours and to come quietly to the negotiating table.

Besides the IPCC, National Councils for SD, local Agenda 21, a good example of a constituted space of negotiation is a 'river contract'. The different points of view are not simply juxtaposed but have to be articulated so that everyone transforms one's perception of the river and of its users, and eventually the river itself. To accompany the development of the spaces of negotiation, the 'stakeholder theory' has been developed and applied.

In the relatively brief history of *sustainable development* as an institutional concept, the spaces of negotiation have already evolved considerably. The enthusiasm of participants at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 is palpable in the document at issue, Action 21. But very quickly *sustainable development* has been reduced to "three pillars" (economic, environmental, social) and businesses have been more effective in the appropriation of the term, as seen in Johannesburg in 2002. The space of global negotiations has clearly closed - just consider the Kyoto Protocol, but other issues such as changing consumption patterns demonstrate it too - while local negotiations have increased and ad hoc alliances are born, especially between enterprises and NGOs.

The representation in the form of a triangle (with the economic at the top) was introduced by the World Bank, and particularly entered the business world (Hodge, 1997). The three pillars are far from being on an equal footing. The representation of the economy is clear, unambiguous and powerful, the environment is diverse, and the social is disparate. The current balance of power is clearly in favour of economic pillar, if only by the uniqueness of its representation. It seems obvious that the economic pillar is represented by companies and their federations. As representations of the environment are multiple (Bachus et al., 2002), its representatives are sometimes contested: there is a deep misunderstanding (perhaps sometimes voluntary) on what is meant by environment. The social pillar is

supposed to be represented by trade unions and development NGOs, but the social is everywhere and its representation challenged. Hence, the adequacy of the representatives to the representations occurs only for the economy. And that is why companies like well the definition in terms of three pillars. Therefore, if *sustainable development* is to find the right balance between the three pillars, it is done in a well-circumscribed framework.

3. The ontology of sustainable development

The reduction to three pillars simplifies the space of negotiation and probably allows more easily to reach compromises. But at what price? *Degrowth* arrives in this context where positions seem frozen by the seizure of power of corporations. It shows what are the assumptions underlying today's compromise *sustainable development*, and how this has been recuperated in the space of negotiation.

Sustainable development is basically a question of speed: destruction and creation rates. Climate has always changed, but it is now changing too fast. Species have always appeared and disappeared, but the rate of destruction is much higher than the rate of creation, leading to the 6th global extinction in the history of life. Poverty and wealth have always existed, but inequalities are growing rapidly. There are today a lot of production but also destruction. Production, however, is fairly uniform, and some destructions are irreparable. There are many destruction for a few real creation: the history of mankind turns dreadful, or at least the current development does not seem able to solve the different crises. A current option taken by *sustainable development* is 'transition management': with more collective reflexivity, the transition towards a sustainable society could be fostered (Kemp & Marten 2007).

Degrowth underlines the emergency of the situation, the imminence of a global, environmental and societal, catastrophe. For *degrowth*, the catastrophe is not desirable, but should be thought as a real possibility. Like Dupuy (2002) says: "we do not believe in what we know". We know we are heading for disaster, but we do not believe it since we do almost nothing to avoid it. The only way to avoid the catastrophe is to embody it in our ontology, as paradoxical it may sound. This 'heuristics of fear' can however work only by convincing people, and a radical transformation of people's consciousness will take time as well. *Degrowth* seems also lacking time. *Degrowth* eliminates the question of transitions. 'Transition' probably refers to a reformist point of view. *Degrowth* would rather use 'mutation'. Mutation denotes more a radical change, a change of ontology, even. There is a proximity between catastrophism and *degrowth*. The question of the becoming ontology, called by the mutation, is however not asked deeply enough.

A strong contrast between *degrowth* and *sustainable development* is the acknowledgment of different crises. Environmental and social crises are certainly admitted by the two. But *degrowth* deals with crises not tackled by *sustainable development*: the loss of cultural diversity, the crisis of political representation, the crisis of meaning

broadly speaking. This places *degrowth* in a minority situation.

The majoritarian aspect of *sustainable development* gives its plausibility to some scenarios, or at least its 'believable' characteristics. On the other hand, *degrowth* looks for opening the possibilities and the virtualities of the current situation. Then it criticizes economic growth, development, commodification. *Sustainable development* is seen as an alibi for governments and companies to carry on their plundering of natural resources in the name of this new rationality that would be innocuous for the planet. The term 'development' itself is subject to discussions: for *degrowth*, development is not a universal process, and should not be imposed on third world countries. 'Development' belongs to a language coined in order to increase the Western hegemony on other populations. Each ethnic group should appropriate again one's identity. This leads to a vision of autonomous micro-societies connected together (Latouche 2006).

Somehow, in criticizing the dominating market (and growth), *degrowth* deepens the distinction between weak sustainability and strong sustainability (Williams & Millington 2004, Harribey 2007). Today, most often, weak sustainability wins while sometimes negotiation takes a 'natural capital' away from the influence of the market. The ontology of *sustainable development* is indeed based on entities and capitals, and on a 'resourcist' vision of nature (it is just required that the sum of capitals must increase). The very fact of speaking in terms of 'capitals' implies the idea of stocks and their convertibility. Growth is simply the indefinite extension of fluxes between capitals (based on the hypothesis that space and resources are illimitable). According to this point of view, material fluxes can be replaced by dematerialised capitals (a.o. services). The quantification of capitals is reflected into the universality of the development: this general ontology is actualised locally through spaces of negotiation, where swaps occur between financial capital, salaries and externalities. (For a detailed analysis of the ontology of sustainable development, see Zaccà 2002).

The relationship between ontology and epistemology helps explain the link between 'rational individual' and 'technological progress'. Each ontology indeed refers to a technology, i.e. a set of knowledge and know-how. The link between ontology and knowledge is epistemological: how some knowledge is formed in a given situation (because knowledge is always situated). The knowledge mobilised by *sustainable development* relies upon technology: rational individuals are attributed the power to choose the most efficient technology to achieve their ends. After many others, *degrowth* asks the question of technology: should we multiply our interventions in the ecosystems in order to manage them more carefully? Negotiation of *sustainable development* leads to more management of the environment; humans are becoming more and more 'nature managers', with expected benefits and unpredictable problems. *Degrowth* is also a refusal of this growth of management. *Degrowth* is however not clear about what to do with existing technologies.

The ontology is manifested notably through favoured policy instruments. The purpose of a policy instrument is to make beings acting. The actors of change in *sustainable*

development are the corporations and the consumers, namely individuals already constituted. A motto of *sustainable development* is "changing behaviours", that reflects the ontology of sustainable governance. Soft law and informational means are recommended to the detriment of stronger actions (rules, taxes). The actors of change for *degrowth* are not very clear yet. It seems that *degrowth* is still based upon modern ontology (i.e. individual responsibility). The motto of *degrowth* might be 'transforming modes of living', but there is currently no political or collective force able to support this at a large scale.

Ontology proceeds from inclusion and exclusion. In the prevalent *sustainable development* ontology, cultural diversity, nature and future generations are excluded. The diversity of cultures steps aside at the international level, where solution is selling technology. *Degrowth* emphasises the role of cultures, their diversities, as point of departure of regimes of individuation. By contrast, technology is presented as a solution that could be implemented in different contexts, notwithstanding the social circumstances of reception. In the space of negotiation, only 'environment' is used, not 'nature', namely these beings living well independently from humans. *Sustainable development* definition is based on the idea of 'future generations', but nobody can claim to be his right spokesperson.

Cultures, natures, future generations: these exist more on the mode of relation than on the mode of entities. A culture belongs to a group of people. A nature is not a set of living beings, but a togetherness of relationships, as an ecosystem. Future generations exist only insofar as we are able to transmit them something. It is striking to notice that in the modern ontology, nature and culture are separated while they are not admitted in the space of negotiation (Latour 2004). It should be exactly the reverse: natures and cultures are not separable and have to enter in the negotiation.

4. Ontological negotiation

The contrast between *sustainable development* and *degrowth* shows the limits of the classic negotiation. The question is to see how *degrowth* could or not make the negotiation becoming *ontological*, namely to help thinking of a negotiation that would also concern the negotiators' being. Negotiating being. In the *sustainable development* framework, negotiation aims mainly at strengthening or weakening some actors: negotiation concerns only the balance of power, not the power themselves. *Degrowth* asks: "what is a good power?"

Classical negotiation focuses on codes: terms are negotiated and succeed in a contract. Eventually, negotiators share common codes, even if they have different ontologies. For instance, a federation of companies or a trade union have not the same ontology, but they can agree in exchanging quantified advantages. The question asked by *degrowth* is about the way ontologies are constituted. In which sense could *degrowth* transform the space of negotiation? A classical negotiation does not touch the negotiators' beings. In such a negotiation, one must not ask to an interlocutor: "what is your culture? How do you consume?", since today, our culture is mainly reduced to the 'society of

consumption'. Ontological negotiation should be conceived as negotiation through which one is negotiating oneself together with the other negotiators. Even a 'revolution' is a way of negotiating: negotiating with the way the space of negotiation is constructed, negotiating our lifestyles, ... *Degrowth* calls for negotiating the frame in which the negotiation happens: political constraints, budget, time, etc. This is not possible as long as *sustainable development* negotiations are framed by the three institutionalised pillars.

Degrowth is a way to debate over ends, to get away from economism. As long as economics is dominating, means will reign over ends. An ontological negotiation would discuss until the means are absorbed by the ends. Then we might be able to begin negotiating with beings that are often presented as transcendent and fragile: ecosystems, human cultures, future generations. But somehow, *degrowth* wants to be able to distinguish anew nature and culture. There is an idea of purity of culture and purity of nature by *degrowth*. *Degrowth* thinks often that mankind and nature should find again a harmonious relationship. "Revive with this frame of prearistotelian mind is without doubt the condition of our survival." I suggest, on the contrary, that ontological negotiation includes discussion on the subject, or rather on mixes that blur the distinction between objects and subjects. It is the only way to understand what "nature" and "cultures " are today (Latour 1993).

In the debate around *sustainable development* and *degrowth*, there is a lot of 'religious' invectives. *Degrowth* criticises the 'market economy' as a new God. Some denounces *sustainable development* as a "new religion" (Brunel 2008). On the other hand, voices are raising against the 'spiritualism' of *degrowth* (Di Méo 2006). (We have seen the problem of the call to nature, to cultures and to future generations.) These 'transcendences' are however not established in the same way. Growth is institutionalised in the framework of *sustainable development*, like a kind of self-prophetic pantheism: all is becoming market. On the other hand, *degrowth* is a way to debate over ends, to get away from economism. As long as economics is dominating, means will reign over ends. An ontological negotiation would discuss until the means are absorbed by the ends, until the distinction between short and long terms is not relevant anymore. Or, rather, until a new meaning to this distinction is given. Then we might be able to begin negotiating with beings as ecosystems, human cultures, future generations. The problem is that *degrowth* often presents these beings as transcendent and fragile. For *degrowth*, nature and cultures seem to be transcendent. They are fragile and need to be protected. That explains some prophetic stances. But that underestimate the process of history and of politics. And that shows the need to make more explicit the required ontology.

We have up to now gathered several clues and elements of the *degrowth* ontology. This ontology is open to every being which takes part to the considered problem. Beings arise as relations, and not as already constituted entities. Virtual beings are accepted as interlocutors. In the classical space of negotiation everything is actual (representatives and their mandates). The negotiation is about relations and tries to tie them in other ways. In the ontological negotiation beings are perceived as nexus of relations; it is then possible to untie and tie in another way beings

themselves. Natures and cultures are intertwined, each time differently. Beings are surrounded by a halo of virtualities, i.e. shaped through the potency of relationships they could make. In this perspective, rituals are practices that associate a gesture to a representation.

This kind of ontology allows experimentation and accounts for bodies and practices. Mutations and bifurcations are possible and thinkable. Negotiating technology is possible and sensible. Use-value is considered for itself and for its incorporation into practices, and cannot be equalised to exchange-value. This approach has a history in which one finds philosophers as Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Whitehead, Simondon, Deleuze (Debaise 2004).

In order to illustrate this '*degrowth* ontology', I will consider the proposition of Guattari (2000): an ontology is the superposition of three ecologies, i.e. related ecologies of environmental, mental and social worlds. An ontological negotiation should concern simultaneously individual, social and environmental levels. The issue of culture and of imaginative faculty (*imaginaire*), fostered by *degrowth*, is then replayed through the relationships of the three ecologies. Guattari thinks that the three ecologies should be changed in the same time: if an ecology is left unchanged, it will react and impede the mutation to occur.

In *sustainable development*, the individual level is defined by the market. *Degrowth* proposes in its charter at this level a programme of voluntary simplicity: "degrowth does not suggest to live less, but better with less goods and more links". In opposition to the ontology of having, *degrowth* promotes an ontology of being — understood as a nexus of relations. *Degrowth* proposes a form of ancestral wisdom: happiness actualises "through the satisfaction of a carefully limited number of needs". To slow down allows transforming one's imagination and feelings, a kind of 'inner revolution'. It questions our lifestyles: comfort or well-being? desire or need? It is very difficult to address these questions today for even if the negotiation is individual, it has to be supported by the others, their practices and the infrastructures. On concrete individual actions, *sustainable development* and *degrowth* can meet, the difference being that *degrowth* does not pretend it is enough.

At the societal level, the question is the type of desired democracy and the organisation of public debates. Participation is called forth, but in every sphere, including the production. Self-management and direct democracy are the political consequences of the *degrowth* ontology.

Environmental negotiation is the most difficult, because the issue is relatively new and cannot rely upon past experiences. Limits do not determine straightforward the possible environment for mankind. Too often *degrowth* thinks in local terms: environment and culture have to be respected. Local limits are clear and should not be touched, for *degrowth*. Global limits are however much less obvious. For *degrowth*, there are clear limits: they are geological. But resources (renewable and non-renewable) depend on technology. So the question of limits is taken back to the negotiation of technology. We will have to negotiate limits. For instance, the global increase of temperature is currently negotiated between mitigation and adaptation. For the biodiversity issue: how many species could disappear

without threatening mankind? What is the place to hold for other species: conservation parks should be open or closed to humans? We are losing our freedom of action: how could we negotiate in other ways with the planet?

5. Conclusion: a new cosmology?

Is it possible to negotiate with whom wants to destroy the object of negotiation? That's the way *sustainable development* thinks of *degrowth*. In the *sustainable development* space, relations to objects and between beings are negotiated. *Degrowth* challenges this for it wants to negotiate also beings, and call for other representatives in the negotiation. *Degrowth* blames *sustainable development* for wishing to change things so nothing changes. It is nevertheless possible that the space of negotiation will be reopened, as some interest for long-term visions is growing and common targets are discussed. The question is again one of speed: will it be fast enough? Ontological negotiation allows that the theme of negotiation evolves through the negotiation, and it will be interesting to observe how the debate between efficiency and sufficiency will evolve around the question of energy.

How is the issue of rhythms inscribed in an ontology? Ontologies are more or less fluid, with different degrees of constituted beings and supple relationships. And as long as it is based on past models, *degrowth* will not lead to a radical and ontological transformation. Our historical being — history of mankind as well as history of life — is at the moment harboured in technology: we can admire these narratives and also say that history as it is going very badly respects the past and hopes of mankind and life. To take up the global challenge, I suggest to think up to the end the process of negotiation until the constitution of the space of negotiation is completely transformed. But to move our ontology, we will have probably to recompose our cosmology.

For Descola, a cosmology is the product of our ontology, of the distribution of beings' properties. The inclusion of virtual beings, and the way to represent them is decisive. Contrary to the current implementation of *sustainable development*, *degrowth* tries to include in its ontology the diversity of cultures. This diversity was valorised in the Brundtland report through the "protection of traditional rights" (chapter 4). But has disappeared from the space of negotiation. The inclusion of new beings should not be limited however to culture: ecosystems and future generations are for instance welcome. Yet, we do not know how to bring us to the cosmopolitics where all beings (human and non-human) have their place, but a negotiated place. The 'we' is itself difficult, is part of the problem.

Every human is concerned by politics, but not only humans are affected. All beings on Earth are more or less affected by humans, and should be present when we ask: "what should we do?" As this question refers to specific situations, always singular, we are not negotiating with all beings, but have to carefully select beings. This had could been sustainable development.

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