

## **Democracy, Degrowth and the Politics of Limits**

**Article by Viviana Asara**

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*As discrediting political opponents is easier than solving the environmental crisis, the idea that ecology comes with an authoritarian streak is a go-to conservative trope. However, democracy has always been a core principle of the many shades of green politics. Viviana Asara explores the intellectual roots of degrowth to show how it is based on a willingness to question the way things are.*

The topic of limits to growth has been at the core of radical environmentalism in both activism and academic literature from political ecology to ecological economics at least since the early 1970s. It first gave rise to political debate in global environmental governance arenas (such as the 1974 UN [Cocoyoc Symposium](#)) and at the European level – with the then-president European Commission Sicco Mansholt advocating for reorientating the economic system towards reduced material per capita consumption.

However, the following decades witnessed an ebb in such concerns due to the rising popularity of a new narrative embodied by concepts such as sustainable development and ecological modernisation, which reframed growth as a prerequisite rather than an obstacle for environmental sustainability. Only after the early 2000s did degrowth emerge as a “forceful conceptual framework and a political mobiliser” drawing in much of the wider debate around the critique of growth. But, against the allegations that a politics of limits may inevitably involve authoritarian tendencies, how has the emerging paradigm of degrowth factored democracy into its thinking?

### **Social or natural limits**

In the vast literature generated in the last decade, degrowth has been conceptualised as an equitable and democratically led selective material and energetic downshifting that sustains human wellbeing, social justice, and ecological conditions while reducing commodification and the marketisation of social life. Beyond a plain ecological concern for the devastating impact of economic growth, it is a broader critique that aims to recast dominant imaginaries and conceptions of the good life.

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This strand of reflection is much influenced by some key France-based political ecology authors writing half a century ago – from André Gorz to Cornelius Castoriadis and Ivan Illich – as well as by later ecofeminist insights – although not always in a properly acknowledged form. Against the risk of some ecological imperative determining the way forward, it puts the notion of self-limitation at the centre of a democratic politics. As Giorgos Kallis puts it, “ultimately the question is about what world we want to construct and for whom, not how to conform with a pre-given reality dictated by nature”. Degrowth supporters emphasise that limits are not simply natural or dictated by objective biophysical processes, but are social-ecological, that is “collectively defined thresholds” that societies establish as self-limitations and conditions for a “good life for all”.

The idea of self-limitation has also led to vigorous debates on the character and essence of limits. In his compelling critical revisiting of the work of Thomas Malthus, Kallis has argued that seeing the natural world as finite implies a world of scarcity. According to Kallis, this paradoxically ends up justifying growth. He shows that for Malthus, inequality is the motor of growth as scarcity of food among the poor will be an incentive for increases in land productivity, leading to the rejection of redistribution and welfare policies in the name of the growth of free markets. The science of economics starting from Malthus thus becomes the science of explaining and justifying capitalism on the premise of scarcity by means of productiveness increases.

Kallis turns this argument into a constructivist case for the rejection of natural scarcity and external limits, and for the need for self-imposed limits. The world is abundant and limitless, and limits are a social choice, he argues. Drawing on an analysis of ancient Greek culture and Castoriadis’s philosophy, he shows that setting up limits to our own powers and intentions is part and parcel of the human pursuit of freedom, justice, and care for others.

However, others have underlined that rather than helping the environmentalist quest, the social construction of limits blurs the distinction between the social and physical dimensions of limits, i.e. between regulatory limits such as caps on emissions, on the one hand, and tipping points identified by natural scientists, on the other, thus providing leeway for climate denialists<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the recognition of natural limits does not necessarily entail a world of scarcity because scarcity is socially defined while natural limits are a property of the material world. The world could be still perceived as abundant within limits, as abundance is shaped by politics and the institutions of the social world.

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## **Self-limitation in the thought of Cornelius Castoriadis**

Both sides of this debate within degrowth build on the idea of self-limitation drawing largely on Castoriadis's thought. The collective institutionalisation of limits should involve a major shift in societal structures and forms of organisation and institutions not based on growth but on principles of equality, solidarity, and real democracy – nothing less than a change of what Castoriadis conceptualised as the radical imaginary of contemporary societies. This defines society's articulation of its central needs, desires, and values, nowadays dominated by the unlimited expansion of production and consumption, as well as of rational mastery in fields from technology to organisation and science.

For Castoriadis, a transformation towards real democracy would need to entail a political creation instituting democracy as an autonomous society that is society as self-institution, i.e. a social regime based on real political equality and direct participation in decision-making. Here autonomy means the continuous self-questioning (collective and individual) of society's laws, institutions, and imaginary significations rather than imputing them to an extra-social order like God, History or Nature, and as such it is a way to continue the movement for human emancipation.

Democracy is the regime of politics, an activity whose end is to change society as a whole and to realise individual and collective autonomy as well as the common good as conceived by the collectivity, that is self-limitation. Self-limitation has two sides: limitation by the society of its unacceptable wishes, tendencies, and acts and the self-limitation of society itself in the legislative authority it exercises over its members. He asks:

*“How far can the ‘right’ (the legally and collectively assured effective possibility) of each individual, of each group, of each commune, of each nation to act as it wants, extend once we know – and we have always known it, but the ecology movement forcefully reminds us of it – that we are all embarked on the same planetary boat and that what each one of us does can have repercussions on everyone else?”<sup>2</sup>.*

I think Castoriadis's words see physical boundaries as not denying political agency but rather making space for a substantive definition of the common good within our embeddedness in the natural world.

## **Democratising the economy**

In present neoliberal conditions, economic imperatives such as austerity-led economic growth set the agenda, and visibly restrict the space for democratic choice and processes. On the one hand, there is a connection between the crisis of capitalist growth and the crisis of liberal democracies. The tension between democracy and capitalism – which was always at the heart of liberal democracy – could indeed be balanced as long as economic growth continued apace, but that is no longer the case. On the other hand, however, the degeneration of neoliberal democracy also stems from the very limits of liberal democracy, which left important areas of exploitation and coercion untouched. The institutions of accumulation, property, the market, and production – crucial areas of environmental impact – are placed beyond the range of democratic jurisdiction.

In this context, the democratic essence of a politics of limits starts with its radical questioning of the world as it is. Incorporating self-limitation into societal institutions would amount to questioning not only consumption but capitalist production processes. The

democratisation of the economy would help deal with issues of alienation, a central aspect of the current social imaginary as characterised by Castoriadis.

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How might this shift be achieved? Given the high level of wealth concentration, some degrowth scholars have emphasised that income redistribution should be complemented with reforms transforming the way we think about property and ownership, including in production, encompassing, for instance, shifting businesses from shareholder to multi-stakeholder governance . On the other hand, democratic forms of ownership that are more attentive to the social and environmental aspects of economic activity should be fostered through the strengthening of a social and solidarity economy, while facilitating some forms of consumptions over others. Policies advocated by degrowth supporters such as resource caps, redistributive taxation and wealth or income caps, universal basic income, working time reduction and work sharing, as well as the relocalisation of economic activities, decommodification of the main economic sectors, and strengthening of public ownership have been proposed as concrete tools to further institutionalise self-limitation.

Calls for “ecological transitions” may have become a new orthodoxy but the EU Green Deal seems a far cry from these envisioned radical social-ecological transformations. Vested interests are strongly present within EU policymaking and degrowth supporters have only just started an in-depth critical reflection of the strategies and alliances to bring about far-reaching change.

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[1] Erik Gomez-Baggethun (2021). “Book Reviews: Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care, Giorgos Kallis. Stanford Briefs (2019).” *Ecological Economics* 182:106926.

[2] Cornelius Castoriadis (1997). *The Castoriadis Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.



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