

André Gorz's Vision for Autonomy and Radical Frugality

Article by Céline Marty

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Troubled by a society drunk on endless growth, André Gorz theorised about alternatives to capitalism that reduce environmental destructions and give people more autonomy. His ideas laid some of the groundwork for degrowth thought today.

The philosopher André Gorz was one of the pioneers of political ecology in France. Writing under the pseudonym Michel Bosquet for the *Nouvel Observateur*, he warned of the dangers of green capitalism, techno-solutionism and techno-fascism as early as the 1970s. The alternative he proposed was self-managed degrowth, where production is reduced to a level that is just enough to satisfy our needs and minimise our consumption of resources. With 9 February 2023 marking the centenary of his birth, now is as good a time as any to discuss the relevance of his thinking today.

A critique of the content of production

Whereas Marxism focuses its critique on the conditions of production, decrying alienation (workers have no control over what they produce or how) and exploitation (their work is not paid fairly, with the difference kept by capitalists to increase their profits), Gorz criticises the content of production, condemning the waste and deliberate lowering of the quality of goods to stimulate ever more consumption. Capitalist production prioritises maximising profits over sustainably satisfying needs.

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What's more, capitalist production does not care about its negative externalities that are barely accounted for. Gorz became aware of this through Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and Barry Commoner's research, and the *A Blueprint for Survival* and *Limits to Growth* reports: all production has an environmental cost because it irreparably destroys material, energy and human resources, wears out infrastructure, and creates waste or other phenomena that require additional human labour to address.

By revealing the material limits of production, political ecology conflicts with the goal of endless growth: it is necessarily anti-capitalist. Gorz notes that capitalism does not account for the environment in so far as it is not costed monetarily, quantified and attributed somewhere along the value chain, but that it can try, temporarily, to adapt to environmental conditions, by raising the price of goods to maintain profit margins or by

offshoring toxic industries to poor countries. At the same time, the state can exploit the environmental emergency to strengthen its powers by creating institutions and restrictions controlled by experts, instead of building broad-base green politics.

For Gorz, it is only by reducing our production and consumption that we can reduce the destruction of resources and our environmental footprint. And rather than being managed technocratically, this degrowth should be self-managed so that production is tailored to collective needs: what are the greatest needs and the most economical means of satisfying them in terms of resources? It's not about "greening" existing production but drastically reducing production to be commensurate with what, collectively, we believe is enough to live well. Gorz advocates true frugality in production and consumption to save energy and materials. Do we really need advertisements for luxury goods or so much choice on our supermarket shelves?

A critique of work

This proposed degrowth runs up against the fear of "destroying jobs". Which is why Gorz goes on to critique the ideology of work that holds work up as the pinnacle of human activity and justifies the existence of any and every job. In the 1980s, he denounced the "servant jobs", those providing domestic services such as delivery or cleaning, consumed by the most affluent in society with the means to buy the time of the poorest, rather than do their housework themselves.

Today, people continue to promote the production of goods and services that are of limited utility (the delivery of takeaway food), that pollute (flying), or other harmful (advertising) simply to maintain the jobs associated with them. Although degrowth would create demand for other jobs, in repair, recycling, and learning everyday skills, it would also imply doing away with jobs that serve a capitalist and productivist society. Not all of today's jobs are desirable in a green society. The main goal of public policy could be to redistribute existing resources and ensure that the basic needs of the whole population are met, instead of creating new, high-pressure full-time jobs.

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Reducing consumption and production would improve the conditions of work – which would be freed from stressful productivism aimed at maximising worker exploitation – and reduce the time and energy that we spend on it. Massively cutting working hours would not only have a positive environmental impact by sparing resources, it would have social and political benefits too: it would restore existential autonomy to everyone, so they could exist outside of their economic function as producer-consumer and devote themselves to activities of their choice, be they social, political, cultural or family-oriented, or simply purposeless, selfless or free, without having to answer to their employer or the state. This would also return power to civil society in the face of concentrated political and economic power.

Future goals: self-management, low tech and frugality

How can we reduce our current dependence on consumer and labour markets to satisfy our needs? Following self-managed work, Gorz advocates self-managed free time through a radical reduction in working hours and a universal basic income to ensure that social protection and income no longer depend on a job determined by the market. This self-management ideal is still relevant today: how can we reduce our dependence on market-oriented and technocratic mechanisms to take back control of our lives? What collective tools can we provide to do this?

In his discussions with Ivan Illich, the philosopher who proposed the idea of “convivial tools” as alternatives to massive industrial tools, Gorz tried to find technologies that promote autonomy. For example, he opposed France’s nuclear electricity in the 1970s for technological and, above all, political reasons: atomic energy involves the centralised and authoritarian management of investment, production, distribution, regulation and maintenance. Conversely, renewable energy can be managed, produced, distributed, and consumed locally.

Just as he was fascinated by digital technology and 3D printing towards the end of his life, today Gorz would be excited by low-tech solutions and DIY tools for cutting our consumption of resources and dependence on standardised goods. Gorz also questions our approach to housing, transport, education and healthcare: the car culture that creates great distances between the places where people live, work and shop; the capitalist schooling that makes students specialise based on the needs of the labour market; and curative medicine for lifestyle diseases, which disempowers patients and is subservient to capitalist interests, especially those of the pharmaceutical industry. He argues instead for schooling that promotes vernacular knowledge based on and nurtured by everyday experience; that teaches people how to use small, convivial tools to meet a range of needs themselves by reducing professional specialisation. In his eyes, all movements demanding more everyday autonomy are, by fighting against the plans of the capitalists and technocrats trying to strengthen their domination, participating in a complex popular environmentalism that transcends traditional partisan political action. This self-managed environmentalism does not delegate power to representative institutions, but creates new spaces for action and freedom where everyone can directly demand and exercise power.

Gorz’s reflections on everyday, autonomous ways of meeting our needs encourages us to redefine what it means to live well – which certainly isn’t the abundance erroneously promised by capitalism: what do we want today for happy, collective frugality?

This article was first published in French by the Fondation Écologie Politique.



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