

## Is a Post-Growth Society Possible?

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Since the 2000s, a certain number of people have been defending the idea of a post-growth society. Personally, I acquired this conviction while working on the issue of what exactly a rich society is by trying to understand the origins of the equation between GDP and wealth (Méda 1999). In particular, my colleagues Jean Gadrey, Florence Jany-Catrice, Isabelle Cassiers, and myself as part of the Forum pour d'Autres Indicateurs de Richesse ("Forum for Other Wealth Indicators"; FAIR) examined the possibility of supplementing GDP with other wealth indicators. If I were to use a hypothetical example, I would say that this post-growth society could come about on the condition that GDP (e.g., production) were bound by strict social and environmental limits that might take the concrete form of the Social Health Index (Jany-Catrice/Marlier 2020) and a carbon footprint. These two indicators would likely play the dual role of an alert system and a threshold that should not be crossed—a national threshold that can be broken down by organizations, territories, or individuals.

Some might object that this is a very technical, even quantophrenic vision, giving in to the temptation to put everything in the form of figures and indicators, and that it is not enough to define indicators for society to change as if by a miracle. This is true. However, I would like to respond by reminding you, first of all, of the extent to which the GDP—or at least the system of national accounts, which, you will recall, is universal—frames and constrains our actions and particularly our public actions. It is a real cognitive framework based on a scheme for interpreting the world, a grammar in which it has been decided

once and for all what counts and what does not. This grammar was developed in the interwar period and after the Second World War within the context of a number of values and beliefs that were codified in this tool. Simon Kuznets (1941: 5), the man who estimated the US national income in 1934 and again in 1941, was fully aware that what he was constructing was based on a multitude of conventions when he wrote:

“For those not intimately acquainted with this type of work it is difficult to realize the degree to which estimates of national income have been and must be affected by implicit or explicit value judgments. [...] The apparent relative unanimity produced by empirical writings on national income is due largely to the estimators’ unconscious acceptance of one social philosophy and their natural reluctance to face such fundamental issues as would reveal that estimates are conditioned by controversial criteria.”

Nowadays, as François Fourquet (1980) brilliantly reminded us in *Les Comptes de la puissance*, we hate degrowth. We want dynamism. We overlook the fact that growth comes with degradation. We want to escape scarcity, rationing, famine, and discomfort. Growth is synonymous with expansion, emancipation, progress, health, and improvement. We have to renew our infrastructure, feed the population, build houses, make cars; economic productivity is seen as the core of progress; consumption is regarded as a necessity and a joy to which all should have access. We are still living within this framework and the mechanisms for valorization created all those decades ago, even though there has been a growing awareness that the devastation caused by growth in such a short period of time is significant, irreversible, and universal and that we need to make a radical change, without being allowed to believe in the celebrated ‘green growth.’ Recently, there has been an accumulation of works denouncing the illusion of green growth and urging us to think radically, differently, to break with growth.

What are the conditions for a possible exit from growth, for a post-growth society? I would like to list them here. It seems to me that we need to adopt a new cosmology by refusing to accept the legacy of modernity and by questioning the Cartesian scheme of nature as an

empty object reduced to an extension vis-à-vis a subject as thinker, master, and possessor. Philippe Descola (2013) has undoubtedly inflicted the great fourth wound on us Westerners by revealing that naturalism was only one type of ontology among others, that the way in which the modern West represented nature was the *least well-shared* thing on the planet, and that it was wrong to think that the separation between humans and non-humans corresponded to a more advanced stage in the evolution of humanity. We therefore need to reintegrate human societies into nature, to replace the paradigm of conquest and exploitation with a paradigm of care, to revise the all-too-human foundations of our disciplines, to demand this same reintegration, and to define a new *novum organum* that includes the human sciences within the limits of nature without becoming the servants of the natural sciences. For me, this is a prerequisite for any exit from our growth-intoxicated societies.

The second prerequisite is to adopt new wealth indicators that will somehow encapsulate and integrate our national accounting system in order to place our productive system within the limits defined by the two indicators that I mentioned above. The third prerequisite is to immediately engage in a policy of massive reduction of inequalities so that all those who today do not have access to the minimum amenities to live decently can benefit from a process that requires an investment by all. If I were to add that an extremely substantial additional public investment will be needed for at least 20 years to decarbonize our economy, I will have mentioned most of the actions that we should put in place, at least in the richest countries, in order to initiate what I call the *ecological conversion* of our societies.

What is still missing is a narrative that explains the benefits that we will be able to derive from such a process. In addition to reducing the risks caused by climate change and the loss of biodiversity, these benefits would range from regaining breathable air, reducing cancers and other sources of death caused by pollution, to finding useful and probably less taxing jobs. The latter will involve reviewing our organization of labor, whether it be the long and absurd global value chains or the way we organize power in companies. All of these elements should accompany this radical change toward an ecological society. We need

such a narrative to generate the enthusiasm we will absolutely have to have, as resistance will be strong since vested interests will be upset and changes in our practices will be far-reaching.

Among these changes, which appear to be both causes and consequences of this process, I would like to spend a moment discussing the democratization of the economy and companies. Many authors, including Thomas Coutrot (see also his contribution in this volume), have emphasized the close links between alienation from work and refraining from voting in elections or voting for the extremes. This is why my colleagues Isabelle Ferreras, Julie Battilana, and I launched a manifesto for the democratization and decommodification of work in May 2020, at the end of the first pandemic-related confinement during which so many often low-status workers had demonstrated their immense usefulness, in the form of a declaration signed by 6000 researchers around the world and published in more than 40 national newspapers (see Ferreras/Battilana/Méda 2020; Fraser et al. 2020). In what later became the book *Le Manifeste travail: Démocratiser, démarchandiser, dépolluer* (“The Working Manifesto: Democratize, Decommodify, Decarbonize”; Ferreras/Battilana/Méda [eds.] 2020), we argue that it is high time to give labor investors the same rights and power as capital providers and propose that from now on workers’ representatives should have as many votes as shareholders and that the main decisions of the company should be taken by an absolute majority of the whole, so that each party has a veto right.

Democratizing our companies is not only a direct consequence of the absolute centrality of workers in the functioning of society but also one of the best ways to set our societies on the path of ecological conversion. This is because workers are in the best position to know which new jobs they will be able to take up, how the inevitable changes in the workforce should be best carried out, and which mechanisms need to be put in place to decommodify work, avoid unemployment, and allow workers in the shrinking sectors to join the new sectors and the new jobs to be created as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Democratizing work and the economy and decommodifying labor thus appear to be central elements of an ecological transformation that

will obviously require new coalitions. Just as in the 19th century, as Henri Hatzfeld has shown, it took the combined efforts of the labor movement, political leaders, physicians, and humanist employers to improve labor conditions, so too, in order to succeed in this process, will we need the simultaneous mobilization of young and not-so-young people, workers from all sectors, trade union leaders, employers who have understood that change must take place as quickly as possible, NGOs, political leaders, and scientists—a coalition of all who are willing to pursue a common cause, the urgency of which is growing every day.

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