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DEGROWTH AND REGOVERNANCE

YVES-MARIE ABRAHAM OF THE UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL, who was one of the organizers of the Third International Degrowth Conference held in Montreal on May 13-19, 2011, has written that “. . . degrowth is a call for a radical break from traditional growth-based models of society, no matter if these models are ‘left’ or ‘right,’ to invent new ways of living together in a true democracy, respectful of the values of equality and freedom, based on sharing and cooperation, and with sufficiently moderate consumption so as to be sustainable.”¹

The concept of degrowth (*le décroissance; decrecimiento; decrescita*) is currently being used in a way that is imprecise, deliberately so.² I take it to be related to, but distinct from, economic ideals such as steady-state economics, social ideas such as decentralization and localization, and cultural ideas such as the contemporary agrarian movement. Rhetorically, one aim of degrowth is defamiliarization, the shock of “making strange” (*ostranenie*), as promoted by the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century.³ By directly and outrageously confronting the central reification and unquestionable assumption of the OverCity of contemporary globalization, endless growth, and material consumption, the notion of degrowth aims to open a new space for critique and utopian imagination. Thinking otherwise is a precondition for living and doing otherwise. Emotionally, the degrowth idea conveys a widespread sense of exhaustion and frustration with excess of all kinds—consumptive, technological, financial—and with the aspiration of mastery, which is not treated as a narcissistic fantasy but as an accomplished fact that has reached the point of cultural satiation and disgust. Ideologically, degrowth turns the tables on the emancipation project of the Enlightenment. Economic growth and human mastery over natural limits is not a sign of our freedom or our spiritual election, as Max Weber suggested, but a sign of our domination and entrapment, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno maintained.⁴ The metaphor of the day here is “addiction,” a

slippery and polysemic trope that one ought to be careful of deploying in social critique, but that is striking and vivid in its capacity to motivate aversive and interventionist social and political responses. Those who believe themselves to be free are in fact being controlled and manipulated by those with opposing interests or by an impersonal system and symbolic order that reduces acting human subjects to responding objects.

In short, the notion of degrowth connotes a particular normative vision of an entire society. That said, the question arises concerning the kind of political economy and governance that would be most fitting and best suited to a degrowth society.

The reality of the ecological limits and planetary boundaries to major forms of human economic and technological activity—especially to those actions that are conventionally counted as economic growth—poses a normative and practical challenge to governance on national, regional, and global levels. We must countenance the possibility that liberal democracy, as we know it, will not be able to meet that challenge and so must give way to a new structure of governance.

It remains to be seen whether this transition to a post-growth governance will be done incrementally and in

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an orderly way, or chaotically in response to significant ecological crisis. It also remains to be seen what general form new regimes of governance can take—how representative and accountable governing officials and bodies will be; how limited their power and authority will be by constitutional and institutional mechanisms and by norms regarding due process of law, justice, and human rights; how democratic they will be and in what sense of the term.

Governance is not the same thing as government. Governance is the overall process of coordinating, shaping, and directing individual and collective agency. Governance is inherently normative, and at its best explicitly ethical. It sets parameters around the means and forms of human agency, excluding some practices (such as genocide, murder, torture, slavery, rape, bigotry, and racism) from the sphere of social life as intrinsically illicit. Governance also defines the telos, the ends, of collective agency; stipulating worthy ideals and placing parameters around the objectives to be intended and sought, again excluding some types of objectives as wasteful or unworthy. Finally, governance embodies the character of the collectivity, representing the kind of society an association of people aspires to be or become. Governance both rests upon, and enacts anew, the understanding of solidarity that holds individuals together in shared meaning and common purpose and mutual endeavor. Governance is an enabling act of mind that creates communities; its work is the construction of institutionalized normative practice and symbolic orders of meaning.

So conceived, governance is a process that involves many institutions—in the economy, civil society, and religious and cultural organizations—in addition to the government legally defined. Governance is even more ubiquitous than the entity, also not identical with the government, called the state. Questions about the form that governance in a degrowth society should take are therefore not limited to structural questions about the location of authority, the distribution and interaction

of powers, the selection of individuals to fulfill specialized roles, or the enactment and enforcement of common rules, as vital as these matters are. Glancing toward Montesquieu, I would say that governance is not only about the letter of the laws, but also about their spirit; not about the body of law, but about its mind.

Heretofore in human history the shaping and directing of human agency has not approached (except on local scales) the boundaries set by the biophysical fact that the earth is an open system as regards energy, but virtually a closed system in regard to matter. Until recently, such boundaries did not matter and the horizons of governance were limited only by human social organization, and the mobilization of collective will. Today natural boundaries do matter as much, or more, than political ones; at any rate, they should. Population, technology, and the concerted mobilization of human ingenuity and economic activity have produced a global exploitation of biophysical “resources” with historically unprecedented pace, volume, and consequence. Humankind has entered the zone of planetary boundaries and effects. That has been the journey of growth governance.

Moving beyond growth governance toward a new sense of normative responsi-

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bility and political accountability consonant with the ecologically destructive power of humanity is the challenge of the future. Will we discover how to circumvent those boundaries, or will we learn how to live within them and accommodate our aspirations and our activities to them? No doubt the temptation to find technological means to overcome natural limits will be alluring; witness the incipient discourse of geo-engineering as a response to climate change, or the various innovations in extractive techniques, such as natural gas fracking or tar sands oil recovery, designed to stave off the closing of the fossil fuel era. I have nothing to contribute to that discourse, and I will not place my wager upon it. I explore instead the articulation of a discourse of natural accommodation and cultural innovation. I explore a discourse in which growth governance is replaced by another governance.

At the Montreal Degrowth Conference last year, the Center for Humans and Nature organized a panel on these issues, asking: Can liberal democracy lead the way to a change in consciousness concerning economic interests and well-being, and concerning their obligations to civic communities and natural ecosystems both nationally and globally? Speakers on the panel were Lisa Eckenwiler of George Mason University, Stephen Latham of Yale University, Jack Manno of SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and myself. Latham's paper will appear in the next issue of *Minding Nature*; the other papers growing out of this panel comprise a special Symposium on Ecological Governance featured in this issue. Eckenwiler presents a conception of ecological personhood and ecological citizenship, and discusses the implications for democratic participation by drawing on feminist theory and theories of place. Jack Manno reflects on what can be learned about ecological governance from North American First Nation sources, particularly the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois). My own essay offers a typology of three modes of governance that could fulfill ecological imperatives in the years ahead—ecological author-

itarianism, ecological discursive democracy, and ecological constitutionalism. These are alternatives to a failing form of interest group democracy, and I offer my assessment of some of the strengths and weaknesses of each type.

Also in this issue, Jake Bornstein offers a complex discussion of the concept of social resilience in the first installment of a two-part article that will be continued in the October issue. Christian Diehm addresses the question of human interactions with wolves, appropriate conservation policies concerning them, and proper moral respect for them. He offers an extended reflection on Aldo Leopold's famous encounter with a dying wolf as recounted in *A Sand County Almanac*. And Peter Forbes, also in the course of a reflection on Leopold, explores the relationship among democracy, responsibility, and a sense of place. He writes, "our strength, our affections, and our responsibility to one another have always been intimately connected to our relationship to place, to land."

The Last Word in this issue belongs to Aidan Donnelly Rowley, a novelist, blogger, and daughter of Strachan Donnelly, founder and first president of the Center for Humans and Nature. Her essay springs from the discovery of some personal effects of her father's

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several years after his death in 2008. Letters from his student days, clippings, his birth certificate. Memories of her own childhood and her father as a parent are reflected in the mirror of her children and her own parenting now.

Many of the essays in this issue address ecological citizenship and ecological self-identity at a conceptual level. Here is a fine and telling moment in which such concepts come alive in personal sensibilities of past and future, place and relationship.

NOTES

1 Y-M. Abraham, "Little Vade Mecum for the Growth Objector," May 2011, at <http://montreal.degrowth.org/aboutdegrowth.html>.

2 S. Latouche, *Farewell To Growth* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009) and "De-growth," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 18 (2010): 519-522; G. Kallis, "In Defense of Degrowth," *Ecological Economics* 70, no. 5 (March 15, 2011): 873-880. J. U. Martinez-Alier, F-D. Vivien Pascual, and E. Zaccai, "Sustainable De-growth: Mapping the Context, Criticisms, and Future Prospects of an Emergent Paradigm," *Ecological Economics* 69 (2010): 1741-1747.

3 F. Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 373-4.

4 M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1958); M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).