

**This is the accepted manuscript version of the contribution published as:**

**Strunz, S., Bartkowski, B. (2018):**

Degrowth, the project of modernity, and liberal democracy

*J. Clean Prod.* **196**, 1158 – 1168

**The publisher's version is available at:**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.06.148>

## **Degrowth, the project of modernity, and liberal democracy**

**Abstract:** Critiques of modernity often align with critiques of the existing institutions of liberal democracy. We argue that the degrowth movement can learn from the experience of past critiques of modernity by avoiding their major mistake – that is, (inadvertently) conflating a critique of modernity with a rejection of liberal democratic institutions. Hence, we suggest to frame degrowth as the promotion of new vocabularies within a deliberative account of democracy. Specifically, we proceed in three steps: first, we briefly review some essential critiques of modernity and their stance towards liberal democracy. Second, we illustrate how some of the argumentative patterns within the degrowth literature may inadvertently endanger core values of liberal democracy. Third, we introduce our perspective on a liberal degrowth that aims to fulfil the “unfinished project of modernity”.

## 1. Liberal democracy on the defense

*How is it possible to reconcile a cosmopolitan, globally integrated, technologically progressive, science-based and liberal-democratic society which places an absolute value on the sanctity of individual human lives, with a more place-bound and communitarian society operating with long time horizons and within ecological limits? (Quilley 2017: 453).*

Liberal democracy is on the defense. A cultural backlash against “liberal cosmopolitanism” currently drives right-wing populism around the world (Inglehart and Norris 2016). For decades already, the support for democracy as a form of government has been receding worldwide, especially so among the younger generations (Foa and Mounk 2017, Mounk 2018). Meanwhile, in left-alternative debates, calls arise for radical transformations away from the founding institutions of liberal capitalist democracies, such as private property (van Griethuysen 2012) or markets as means of resource allocation (Trainer 2011: 80). What is more, fundamental democratic institutions are explicitly up for re-consideration: “I am not afraid to draw the conclusion that emancipatory politics should not be bound *a priori* by formal democratic procedures; people quite often do not know what they want, or do not want what they know, or they simply want the wrong thing” (Žižek, interviewed in Browne 2016).

Critiques of liberal democracy often originate from or align with critiques of modernity. For a historical example, consider Germany’s embrace of National Socialism in the 1930s, which has been interpreted as a “crisis of modernity” (Schwaabe 2005): the discontents caused by industrialized capitalism and mass culture, including a deep sense of uncertainty and alienation, gave rise to mental dispositions highly receptive for anti-liberal ideologies. The Third Reich also illustrates the possibility of “reactionary modernism”, in that technological and scientific progress continued in full contempt of political liberalism as a main ideological tenet of modernity (Herf 1984). So we are confronted with a conflicted overall relation between modernity, liberal democracy and their critics. Authors such as Illich, Marcuse and Heidegger, who offered more general critiques of modern culture and society, also displayed an ambivalent if not hostile attitude towards the institutions of liberal democracy. At the same time, their respective goals did explicitly *not* consist in undermining human freedom as such; quite the contrary, they wanted people to emancipate themselves from alienation and from the constraints (supposedly) created by modernity. The interest of the present paper, then, is for the following prospect: a radical critique of modernity may entail a rejection of (some) existing institutions of liberal democracy, because the latter is based on compromise and does

not seem to be amenable to radical change – however, such radical rejection endangers the core values of open society and runs the risk of undermining its very purpose of freedom, emancipation and harmony.

Given this context, what is the degrowth movement's stance towards liberal democracy? As the degrowth movement is very heterogeneous, no clear and unanimous answer exists (cf. Weiss and Cattaneo 2017). While the degrowth movement and the scientific literature related to it seem to put much focus on emancipation, (individual) freedom and (democratic) participation (Cosme et al. 2017; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2017), the picture is anything but homogenous. Consider the empirical survey by Eversberg and Schmelzer (2017), who surveyed the attitudes of attendants to the 2014 International Degrowth Conference: they portray a “degrowth spectrum” characterized by “conflictual diversity”, within which they delineate five main currents (in order of their relative share within the study): “voluntarist-pacifist idealists”, “sufficiency-oriented critics of civilization”, “alternative practical left”, “immanent reformers”, “modernist-rationalist left”. Amongst these currents, the “immanent reformers” promote “a pragmatic and gradualist transformation within existing institutions” (ibid.: 14f); a somewhat similar approach is found among the “modernist-rationalist left”. By contrast, the “sufficiency-oriented critics of civilization” perceive “contemporary society as rotten to the core and ultimately doomed” (ibid.: 13); thus, they regard institutional reforms as futile and suggest to better prepare for the inevitable civilizational collapse. Similar tenets can be found in the “alternative practical left” cluster.

Against this background, we explore the ambivalent relation between degrowth, modernity, and liberal democracy. To this end, we follow Habermas's (1994[1980]) notion of the “unfinished project of modernity”, that is, the striving for a just society via the autonomous development of science, morality, law and the arts. Basically, this concept aims to capture the legacy of the Enlightenment. Liberal democracy figures as the *current* institutional embodiment of the “unfinished project of modernity”. When speaking of “liberalism” or “liberal democracy”, we mean a mode of societal organization that is based on the principle of limited knowledge or “inherent uncertainty of being right or wrong”, as forcefully advocated by Mill (1859). This basic skepticism regarding factual and especially moral “truth” implies the maximum of personal freedom for each member of a polity that is compatible with the same amount of freedom available for others (Mill 1859; Habermas 1996). Particularly, free and open discourse that is never “finished” is an essential component of a liberal “open society” as understood here (Popper 2011[1945]; Habermas 1996). We do not link our

definition of liberal democracy to any specific set of institutions. This minimalist definition requires from a democratic society that (i) it is egalitarian in terms of rights; (ii) it is non-dictatorial in Arrow's (1951) sense; and (iii) its institutions allow for corrections of the societal course of action on the basis of public discourse (Sen 2009). These are – admittedly and purposely – very modest minimum requirements with two implications: first, a wide variety of actual political and economic institutions may practically fulfil these requirements. Amongst others, one might think of a highly decentralized political system based on participatory processes and democratic control over significant parts of the economy. Second, none of this implies the appeal to a universalist, a-historic conception of reason. On the contrary, moral and societal progress can be understood as the widening and deepening of solidarity (Rorty 1989) – past examples might include suffrage for woman, social security and universal healthcare, more recent examples being same-sex marriage and animal rights.

Still, existing liberal democracies clearly fall short of fully delivering on the promises of the project of modernity, so a crucial issue reads: is the project to be abandoned as a whole or is it just unfinished, as Habermas and others have thought? Can the hypertrophies of modernity be tackled without losing its many achievements? After all, modernity is a *normative* project based on the premise that, in principle, social progress is possible and desirable. Our main argument, then, is that the degrowth movement may learn from the experience of past critiques of modernity by avoiding their major mistake – that is, (inadvertently) conflating a critique of modernity with a rejection of the open society, and thus undermining its own emancipatory agenda. Against this backdrop, we follow Rorty's (1989) suggestion to base our "social hopes" on the promotion of new vocabularies: from this perspective, the degrowth movement is about increasing the range of people who use a specific vocabulary – one that revolves around notions such as "sufficiency" and "conviviality" rather than "net worth" or "efficient market hypothesis". We also draw on Habermas' (1984; 1987; 1996), Sen's (2009) and others' understanding of democracy through the lens of public deliberation, with less focus on specific institutions. By enriching Habermas' notion of the unfinished project of modernity with Rorty's (1989) pragmatist perspective, we sketch possible elements of a liberal approach to degrowth that we believe is non-self-contradictory. In a nutshell, Rorty

demonstrates how liberal degrowthists may advance Habermas's vision of fulfilling the project of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, we argue that the degrowth movement needs to clarify its stance towards modernity and its different aspects, lest it endangers liberal democracy by trying to remedy the ills modernity has brought about. Note that there exists no *a priori* certainty whether the 'project of modernity' can be fulfilled within ecological limits (i.e., whether the epigraph has a positive answer). Yet, as we will argue, abandoning the project of modernity would be self-defeating from the perspective of degrowth because the latter also relies on the normative foundation of modernity (e.g. autonomy, emancipation).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 exemplarily reviews some influential and instructive cases of modernity critique (Heidegger, Illich, Marcuse, The Dark Mountain Manifesto and Zerzan) in comparison with Habermas's vision. Subsequently, Section 3 traces ambivalence towards liberal democracy by some strands of the degrowth movement and relates them to general doubts whether the project of modernity should be pursued. Section 4 proposes to frame degrowth as promotion of new vocabularies within a deliberative democratic framework. Finally, Section 5 summarizes our argument and draws conclusions.

## 2. The critique of modern civilization

This chapter provides an overview of important topoi of modernity critique. The chosen authors each serve to exemplify a specific strand of critique:<sup>2</sup>

- Section 2.1: *Martin Heidegger* illustrates a strand of critique that diagnoses *inauthenticity* and self-alienation of the individual as main characteristic of modern life. In particular, Heidegger expresses an "anti-humanistic nostalgia for a world with higher meanings than our own" (Richardson 2012: 369).

---

1 We do not intend to devise here an encompassing and systematic theory of modernity ourselves and we acknowledge some differences between the authors drawn upon: For instance, we are aware that Habermas has in mind a more ambitious concept of reason than Popper, and that the combination of Rorty's approach with elements of Habermas' deliberative democratic theory may be seen as challenging; yet this combination is neither impossible nor insensible, as we hope to demonstrate (see also Dieleman 2017; Niznik and Sanders 1996).

2 Certainly, many other critiques of modernity have been voiced (e.g. by Charles Taylor, Cornelius Castoriadis), but a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this section which first and foremost aims to illustrate the different foci and the varying severity within the literature criticizing modernity. Comparing our classification to Bennet (2006), who distinguishes three nodes of modernity critique, a "Heideggerian", a "Weberian" and a "Nietzschean", we straightforwardly adopt the "Heideggerian" category; Illich might exemplify both the "Weberian" (focus on disenchantment, rationalization) and the "Nietzschean" (creativity vs. the forces of regularization) nodes; with Marcuse we highlight the importance of critical theory (Bennet subsumes critical theory under the "Weberian" node) as a distinguishable current.

- Section 2.2: *Herbert Marcuse* is chosen here as exponent of *critical theory*, which in the tradition of Marx seeks to expose *power structures*. By offering a forceful critique of consumer society, Marcuse continues to inspire resistance movements worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as a “Heideggerian Marxist” (Jaeggi 2016), Marcuse fuses Marx’s economic and Heidegger’s spiritual notions of alienation.
- Section 2.3: *Ivan Illich* exemplifies the critique of *systemic differentiation*. That is, Illich explores how the very processes usually portrayed as progress (professionalization of areas such as education and healthcare) negatively impact on the individual via subjugating it to systemic needs. Most notably, Illich argues that technology has become an end in itself rather than a means to worthwhile ends.
- Section 2.4 portrays two distinguishable variants of *complete disillusion* with modernity. The Dark Mountain Manifesto (by *Paul Kingsnorth* and *Douglas Hine*), while not being opposed to liberal democracy, expects global civilization to collapse. *John Zerzan* illustrates the extreme end-point of any modernity critique, that is, the outright rejection of civilization and the vision of all women and men returning to a nature-bound life as hunter-gatherers.

Heidegger, Illich and Marcuse exhibit an ambivalent stance towards modernity. As Bennet (2006: 222) puts it, the main nodes of modernity critique are still “infused with the *hope* that the world is susceptible to critical reasoning” (italics in the original). But as regards the respective contemporary political institutions, they seem to have all but lost the hope. In comparison, Jürgen Habermas explicitly aims to further pursue the project of modernity in reconciliation with liberal democracy (Section 2.5). It is this Habermasian critique of modernity that will subsequently serve as our reference point for a liberal degrowth vision.

The critiques discussed in this chapter have also inspired the degrowth discourse – though not all authors are explicitly acknowledged as degrowth precursors: Our aim here is not to depict a genealogy of the degrowth discourse but to (i) briefly review essential modernity critiques and (ii) illustrate the affinity of the more radical critiques towards a dismissal of liberal democracy. Subsequently, we will show that, nevertheless, parts of these critiques might be fruitfully linked to the proposed liberal “vocabulary” approach (cf. Section 4).

## 2.1 Heidegger or “life in inauthenticity”

---

<sup>3</sup> For this reason Marcuse has been chosen to represent critical theory rather than Adorno/Horkheimer (see Lamas et al. 2017).

Martin Heidegger's opus is notoriously ambivalent. In what follows, we review some of the more radical and dark strands; yet we will also point to the more relaxed aspects in his writing (mostly, by the "late" Heidegger) in Chapter 4.1. Heidegger generally delivers a stern assessment of the modern condition. Following Heidegger, there are two basic ways of approaching nature – *Hervorkommenlassen* and *Herausfordern*. The first implies that man lets nature reveal itself. Literally, the German word means that humanity does *not* actively approach nature; rather, she lets nature come out of hiding by itself. Thus, it is a contemplative stance that waits for nature to show what it truly is. By implication, man cannot produce this kind of truth or control the process towards it; it is about meditative thinking and preserving an open attitude. Unfortunately (according to Heidegger), mankind has for a long time embarked on the second way, which refers to humanity's "challenging" of nature. By way of calculative thinking, man successfully attacks and conquers nature. The emergence of modern science is pivotal here, as scientific rationalism facilitated and established this paradigm of control and management (Cooper 2005).

The ubiquity of this frame of mind, and the inescapability of the ensuing processes, once set in motion, may be illustrated by man's paradoxical involvement with technology where positive feedback loops strengthen our entrapment: technology-driven problems can only be solved via technology (see García et al. 2017). But it was not through the use of technology that we created our modern predicament in the first place. Rather, technology is only an extension of the general challenging approach towards nature. The consequence of all this is epistemic failure: "The question concerning technology is the question concerning the constellation in which revealing and concealing, in which the essential unfolding of truth comes to pass" (Heidegger 1977[1954]: 315). In other words, the challenging approach entails a concealment of the truth: our openness is lost and so is our access to being. As a result, we are confined to a life in *Un-Eigentlichkeit* (in-authentic life). Hence, the modern human condition is one of spiritual weakness and inauthenticity.

Heidegger's stance towards politics in the Weimar Republic mirrors this dire epistemic diagnosis. Political instability in Germany's first parliamentary democracy exacerbated an already widespread sense of uncertainty as the main signum of the societal "crisis of modernity" (Schwaabe 2005). Thus, Heidegger's longing for existential and spiritual renewal reflects a sentiment shared by many of his contemporaries (cf. Gumbrecht 1998). It also yields a desire for apolitical politics, for a revolution that jolts the political sphere out of the realm of merely interest-driven bargaining. In last consequence, Heidegger's critique of

modernity gave way to staunch anti-liberalism. His ensuing involvement with Nazism, if only temporary, was ardent and not accidental – Heidegger’s Nazism, of course, is a topic of its own, which we will not explore in more depth here.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this article, it suffices to retain the following point: the anti-modern mindset and vocabulary provide a fertile ground for a rejection of the open society, as the latter embodies modern life in all its facets. At the same time, the late Heidegger’s “releasement” approach, which exhibits a more relaxed stance towards the modern world, has recently been invoked as a promising inspiration for degrowth’s relationship towards technology (Heikkurinen 2016).

## 2.2 Marcuse or “voluntary servitude in the affluent society”

Herbert Marcuse – from whom there is a strong indirect influence on the degrowth movement in that Marcuse stimulated and shaped Illich’s perspective (Muraca and Neuber 2017) – illustrates the Marxist tradition of modernity critique: “The just response to modernity qua ideology is modernity qua critique; that is, the clear-eyed unmasking of inequities that reveals them to be products of social choices that could be otherwise” (Bennet 2006: 219). Overall, this tradition of ideology critique tends to reject the institutions of liberal democracy because they camouflage or legitimize the economic power relations and injustices that inherently characterize capitalist societies. Marcuse acknowledges “potential liberating blessings of technology and industrialization” which can only be realized after the dismantling of the institutions of repression and injustice (1967: 68). Thus, modernity is not rejected as a whole but rather its institutionalization in the form of liberal democracies with their “illusion of popular sovereignty” (Marcuse 1964).

Marcuse particularly criticizes humanity’s voluntary self-alienation, the reduction to “one-dimensional” beings within consumer capitalism: individuals consent to their de-facto status as slaves in “the affluent society”, confined to work and consumption in perpetual alternation. In the characteristically dialectic pattern of reasoning, Marcuse poses the dilemma as follows: “The transition from voluntary servitude [...] to freedom presupposes the abolition of the institutions and mechanisms of repression. And the abolition of the institutions and mechanisms of repression already presupposes liberation from servitude, prevalence of the need for liberation” (1967: 178f.). Furthermore, Marcuse contends that “preaching

---

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger’s Nazism has been discussed anew after the publication of his notebooks revealed deeply rooted anti-Semitism. So probably there is more to his Nazism than just chance events and character flaws, as suggested by Rorty (1999: 192), who portrays Heidegger as a “cowardly hypocrite”. In the end, however, Wheeler’s (2011) judgment that we should *not* be “looking for evidence of Nazism in every twist and turn of the philosophical path he lays down” seems sensible.

nonviolence on principle reproduces the existing institutionalized violence” (1967: 90). In other words, violence may be acceptable as a means to overthrow unjust capitalist institutions.

### **2.3 Illich or “the loss of autonomy”**

In a way, Ivan Illich, who has become a popular source for degrowthists (e.g., Demaria et al. 2013, Samerski 2016), echoes and radicalizes previous critiques of the rationalizing process of modernity as described, for instance, by Max Weber. Modernity yields societal differentiation into separate subsystems, each of which follows its particular logic, and concomitant processes of rationalization and bureaucratization of each and every aspect of life. In Illich’s view, this does not only imply a disenchantment of the world, but also leads to a loss of autonomy and actual damage for individuals. Specifically, Illich contends that the very institutions commonly interpreted as improving individual liberty and societal welfare actually rather work to the individuals’ detriment: Healthcare, the legal system, schools and public transport transform autonomous individuals into patients, clients, students, and commuters. Thus, modernity replaces communality, mutuality and autonomy with ruthless systemic necessities. Illich radically questions the institutions of modern life for their compulsory, normalizing and role-enforcing effects. The prevalence of systemic pressures entails that rather than developing our own interests and capabilities, we are forced to fulfil specific preordained roles.

Illich’s book titles, such as “Deschooling Society”, “Medical Nemesis” or “The Right to Useful Unemployment” attest to the severity of his critique. His judgment on the medical system, for instance, could hardly be more devastating: “The pain, dysfunction, disability, and anguish resulting from technical medical intervention rival the morbidity due to traffic and industrial accidents and even war-related activities, and make the impact of medicine one of the most rapidly spreading epidemics of our time” (Illich 1977: 17). Note that his critique does not concern curricula or the quality of healthcare – it concerns the corrosive effects of professionalized education, medicine, transport etc. *as such*. Consider the following claim based on Illich: “even in a degrowth-society technologies that are mainly cherished as public goods such as high-speed trains or healthcare will inevitably unfold their destructive effects” (Samerski 2016: 4). The gist of Illich’s diagnosis: in modern industrial societies, individuals have become enslaved by technological and systemic imperatives. Tools are no longer means, they are ends in themselves.

In consequence of his diagnosis, Illich promotes strong restrictions on technology and seems prepared to let go of professionalized and bureaucratized institutions such as the educational

system altogether. That said, he does not advocate a complete rejection of technologies; he does, instead, favor a “convivial” approach to remedy the degenerating effects of modernization and rationalization. A convivial society is one “in which modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers” (Illich 1975: 12). Conviviality, then, implies that technology and tools are again confined to their prior role as means. Reversing the degenerating tendency of modernity, Illich argues, will “remain a pious dream unless the ideals of socialist justice prevail” (ibid.: 25). So reclaiming autonomy vis-à-vis technology is inherently linked to institutional inversion. As a possible example for such an inversion, Illich refers to China: “China has proved that a sudden inversion of a major institution is possible. It remains to be seen if this deprofessionalization can be sustained against the overweening ideology of unlimited progress” (ibid.: 18). “With the possible exception of China under Mao, no present government could restructure society along convivial lines” (ibid.: 29). Illich focuses on the “barefoot doctors” (laymen health workers) as an example of the desired de-professionalization.

Yet, on several levels, it is puzzling that Illich, who vigorously attacks modernity’s tendency towards industrialization and whose philosophy of autonomy directly opposes any form of authoritarianism should name Mao’s China as a positive example: Mao’s “Great Leap Forward”, a campaign aiming at decentral forms of industrialization from 1958 to 1960, contributed to the great famine that probably caused 45 million deaths from 1958 to 1962 (Dikötter 2010); moreover, Mao’s autocratic rule built on a personality cult and forced-labor camps. Illich published his book in 1973, so the defense that he might not have known the full extent of the disasters engendered by the Great Leap (e.g. Gomiero 2017) seems unconvincing. This is not a guilt-by-association argument against Illich. The question, rather, is how someone striving for individual autonomy came to positively refer to Mao’s China?<sup>5</sup>

## **2.4 The Dark Mountain Manifesto or “uncivilization”; Zerzan or “anarcho-primitivism”**

Some are disenchanted with modernity altogether. This includes those who ponder how the inexorable breakdown of civilization can be weathered and, by contrast, those who even seek to precipitate its collapse. The first perspective may be illustrated by the Dark Mountain Manifesto (Kingsnorth and Hine 2012). It expects that global social-ecological collapse cannot be prevented because civilization’s “foundations [are being] snatched from under us.” While the myth of progress unravels, the manifesto calls “rise to the challenge of ecocide with

---

<sup>5</sup> Note the parallel to Herman Daly’s embracement of China’s one-child policy as a solution to the population problem (1996: 120).

a challenge of its own: an artistic response to the crumbling of the empires of the mind.” Put differently, the founding myth of civilization also begets the causes for its demise. Thus, the manifesto calls for “reassert[ing] the role of storytelling,” for all forms of culture to create alternative narratives – stories of “uncivilization” that might help humanity to cope with the inescapable collapse.

The second perspective, John Zerzan’s anarcho-primitivism, takes all the previous critiques to their logical extreme; it would actually welcome the collapse of global civilization, advocating humanity’s return to not only anti-modern but even pre-Neolithic lifestyles. Hence, hunter-gatherers are portrayed as the ideal (and only sustainable) form of human life on earth. This may be exemplified by Zerzan’s volume “Against Civilization”, where he claims that “we have taken a monstrously wrong turn with symbolic culture and division of labor” and that “the logic of domestication, with its demand to control everything, now shows us the ruin of civilizations that ruins the rest” (Zerzan 1999: 221). So where the Dark Mountain followers hope that art and poetry provide a refuge for humanity, the anarcho-primitivists would even discard symbolic culture. Also, Zerzan approvingly includes an excerpt of “Industrial society and its future” by Theodore Kaczynski, the so-called “Unabomber”, whose mail-bombing campaign targeted individuals singled out for their representing industrial civilization. While rejecting Kaczynski’s method, Zerzan promotes the same anti-modern perspective, taken to its most extreme end.

## **2.5 Habermas or “the unfinished project of modernity”**

Each of the preceding authors highlighted particular failures of modernity. Nevertheless, they all explicitly or implicitly dismiss the institutions of liberal democracy because they deem these institutions incapable of answering to (or even responsible for) the perceived ills that modernity has brought about.

An important route from a more moderate critique of modernity toward support for liberal democracy has been lit by Habermas (1984; 1987). From his theory of communicative action it follows that the “lifeworld” (i.e., where individuals communicate to create social solidarity and reproduce cultural norms) should be defended against “colonization” by systemic imperatives of strategic action and purely calculative thinking. At the same time, this counterattack against progressive rationalization of the lifeworld does emphatically *not* lead to a backward-looking glorification of pre-Enlightenment societies. To the contrary, the “unfinished project of modernity” deserves all support within the bounds of possibility:

*In an extensively rationalized lifeworld, reification can be measured only against the conditions of communicative sociation, and not against the nostalgically loaded, frequently romanticized past of premodern forms of life (Habermas 1987: 342).*

Due to this reason, Habermas for example criticizes certain anti-modern trends of the Left-Green movement in Germany (1994[1980]).

Habermas considers the colonization of the lifeworld as an *excessive* form of an otherwise beneficial process that relieves society's members from risks and effort inherent in unmediated communication by shifting coordination towards "steering media" (e.g. money, power). Thus, rationalization as a main characteristic of modernity is not problematic per se; it can become so if it becomes excessive, "colonizing". The solution is clearly not abandonment of the "project of modernity", but rather its continuation through emphasis on communicative rationality as complement to instrumental rationality (see also Blau 2011).

### **3 The degrowth movement and the open society – no need for enemies with friends like these?**

The degrowth spectrum is composed of various strands, which might be subdivided in various ways. One account is provided by Ott (2012), who distinguishes four currents within the degrowth literature, three of which strive after reform of existing liberal democracies whereas the fourth aims at a fundamental institutional rupture. By comparison, Eversberg and Schmelzer (2017) in their empirical study among participants of the 2014 International Degrowth Conference delineate five currents with different foci of modernity critique. The more reformist strands aim to correct the hypertrophies of modernity (e.g. excessive rationalism, fixation on economic growth and technology), yet do not reject the existing institutions of liberal, capitalist democracies. For instance, Buch-Hansen (2014) argues that institutional diversity *within* capitalism should not be neglected: from this perspective, a degrowth economy will most likely emerge as a hybrid of existing and new institutional elements.

By contrast, other strands issue a dire diagnosis of man's modern condition. In this section, we illustrate how *some* of these modernity critiques within the degrowth discourse may foster (often inadvertently) tendencies to undermine existing liberal democracies. For instance, Escobar (2015) explicitly combines a critique of liberal democracy with an overall critique of modernity. Consequently, he calls for "an entirely different logic of socio-natural life, indexed provisionally as non-liberal, non-capitalist, communal and relational", where the transition to

this logic “will have to involve more radical questionings of growth, extractivism, and even modernity than ever before” (ibid: 460f.). In a similar way Trainer (2011: 71) asserts that “what is required is much greater social change than Western society has undergone in several hundred years”. According to Eversberg and Schmelzer (2017), one important current within the degrowth movement are the “Sufficiency-oriented Critics of Civilization”, who have given up on the project of modernity and long for a fundamental rebuilding of a spiritual, nature-based and more communal society: they articulate “a wholesale critique of civilization” (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2017: 22) and “advocate a return to the ‘lifestyles of previous generations’”; these modernity-critics represent the second-largest cluster in the analysis, and half of the group believes that “man should return to his (and her) natural place in the world” (ibid.: 11).

Radical critiques against scientific rationalism and technology also tend to call for fundamental institutional rupture. Consider Gorz’s (whose influence on the degrowth movement “cannot be stressed enough”, Muraca 2013: 162) critique of technology-based capitalism. Gorz (1980) denounces the current socio-technical configurations as “technofascism” (ibid: 17) and, specifically in the energy sector, as “electrofascism” (ibid.: 106). Hence, he contends that current institutions need to be transcended, that is, radically transformed in order to free people from this oppression. The question is whether in the course of freeing them from oppression, they are not made unfree in other dimensions. More recently, Samerski (2016) argues – based on Illich’s modernity critique – that the degrowth movement should “seek deliberate limits to manipulative technologies in general, including digital devices and professional services”; to this aim, the degrowth movement should explicitly stress the “need to downscale institutions”.

Overall, the “anti-systemic potential of *décroissance*” (Muraca 2013) tends to dismiss the currently prevailing institutions of representative democracy as *democratic-in-name-only*: Deriu (2012: 556), for example, refers to existing liberal democracies as “the so-called democratic countries” where “citizens are in fact at the mercy of immense and impersonal powers”, that is, corporations. This diagnosis is often accompanied by calls for more direct forms of democracy. In this vein, Asara et al. (2013) consider the quest for “real” and “true” democracy as a pivotal part of the degrowth project. Also, anarchism is sometimes proposed as the adequate “political imaginary” for the degrowth movement (e.g. Escobar 2015: 457). In

sum, while different strands emphasize different aspects, they vary a common theme: failure of modernity coincides with a failure of institutions of liberal democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Given the co-evolution of technological and social structures, it seems straightforward that a strong overall disenchantment with modernity often aligns with a rejection of existing liberal democracies. To be sure, most of the radical critiques presumably aim to preserve and nurture liberal values such as free speech, freedom of religion and sexual orientation. Yet, we would like to point out a crucial risk here: the value foundation of liberal democracy cannot be taken for granted – doing so might rather endanger these values. In this sense, radical approaches to degrowth run the risk of undermining and eventually losing in their quest for “true”, “unalienated”, “reembedded”, free, democratic society those freedom-guaranteeing institutions that are already in place. Indeed, it has been argued that modern mindsets, institutions and technologies are inextricably linked: “capitalism, psychological individuation and liberalism emerged together, remain interwoven and mutually dependent in complex ways, and depend absolutely on a continually expanding throughput of energy” (Quilley 2013: 263). By implication, it would be “highly questionable” whether liberal “social and institutional forms would survive the transition to a low-energy regime” (279; see also Bailey 2015).

This points to the risk of inadvertently sacrificing liberal values. Note that argumentative patterns such as “true democracy”, “real democracy” vs. “technofascism” and “so-called democratic countries” where people live “at the mercy of immense and impersonal powers” share a structural affinity (i.e. not necessarily substantial conceptual agreement) with some of the more radical modernity critiques sketched in Section 2 (e.g. Heidegger’s juxtaposition of authenticity as opposed to modern life’s in-authenticity). The problem is that if existentialist vocabulary (truth, authenticity) enters the political domain, this jeopardizes political freedoms. Such vocabulary lends itself to engender disdain for all existing institutions and, in consequence, to justify violent means in order to overthrow democracies-in-name-only. In fact, the basic values of liberal democracy have been explicitly questioned in the name of preventing ecological disaster (Heilbroner 1974, Ophuls 1977; see also the critical analysis of eco-authoritarianism in Shahar 2015). Finally, consider that someone as Illich, who clearly championed an anti-authoritarian position, nevertheless proposed Maoist China as a possible example of a society that could be restructured along convivial lines (Illich 1975: 29). Thus,

---

<sup>6</sup> Certainly, not all exponents cited in this paragraph reject modernity as a whole. While some authors seem to dismiss the *ends* of the project of modernity, others only seem to doubt that modern liberal democracies provide the *means* towards a degrowth economy.

the spectre of authoritarianism creeping in through the back door should not be lightly dismissed.

Again, we presume that the core values of liberal democracy are cherished by a majority of degrowthists. We just point to the fundamental risk that these liberal values be unintentionally abandoned. Imagine this scenario: disappointment with existing institutions leads to welcoming institutional breakdown in the hope of rebuilding a more just society out of the debris, whereupon “true democracy” fails to materialize and the values of liberal cosmopolitanism are sacrificed somewhere along the way.

#### **4 A liberal approach to degrowth**

In this chapter, we first introduce our perspective on degrowth as promotion of new vocabularies. Second, we demonstrate how elements also from the more radical modernity critiques outlined in Section 2 might enrich the degrowth vocabulary. Third, we argue that the vocabulary perspective fits well with a deliberative account of democracy.

##### **4.1 Degrowth as promotion of a new vocabulary**

Drawing upon Rorty (1989), the degrowth movement can also be conceived as the attempt to promote a new vocabulary. Rorty’s conceptual figure of a “liberal ironist” appeals to empathy and aims to reduce suffering via widening solidarity – to achieve this, the liberal ironist re-describes the world and creates new vocabularies. The search for authenticity and truth is then relegated to the personal sphere and viewed as an individual project of self-creation. From this perspective, the primary aim of the degrowth movement is to increase the number of people who use a specific “degrowth vocabulary”, consisting of both language and practice.

As a matter of fact, a recent volume entitled “Degrowth. A vocabulary for a new era” (D’Alisa et al. 2015) promotes terms such as “commons”, “work sharing”, “environmental justice” or “buen vivir” and critically engages with others, such as “commodification”. To be sure, this vocabulary is open to debate: notions such as “sufficiency” or “mindfulness”, widely discussed in the sustainability fields (and also taken up in the degrowth discourse), are not included. Also, some of the contributors may see degrowth as a radical project and perceive liberal democracies as failed. But the dictionary approach illustrates our general argument: vocabularies represent a means of re-describing and re-framing the world, and thus of introducing new ideas which, if taken up by the “audience”, would contribute to the achievement of the goals of the degrowth movement.

The idea is not to present one's case with reference to "truths" that others fail to see or acknowledge. Rather, it is about telling stories that demonstrate the attractiveness of a sustainable lifestyle as compared to the "poverty" of unsustainable alternatives. Thus, such stories promote environmental values, including a stewardship attitude towards nature, or more community-centred and cooperative modes of economy, and show how currently prevailing lifestyles do not necessarily contribute to leading "good lives". Here, literature can play an important role, too (see also Bina et al. 2017). In fact, there are examples of popular books that have fostered a new, degrowth-compatible vocabulary. The classic example is, of course, "Limits to Growth" by Donella H. Meadows and others (1972), which sets out the general frame of mind. More recent examples include Jonathan Safran Foer's "Eating Animals" (2009), which has raised the awareness of animals suffering as a result of current consumption patterns, while also advertising the benefits of a more conscious diet, or Niko Paech's "Liberation from Excess" (2012), in which he argues that sufficiency and (limited) self-subsistence would not be a sacrifice but rather a "liberation". In a very similar fashion, Ericson et al. (2014) argue that mindfulness contributes to sustainability in that it enables people to escape the hedonic treadmill. Yet mindfulness and sufficiency cannot be decreed (in the sense that individuals can be made to actively support them). They can, however, be promoted as part of a degrowth vocabulary.

#### **4.2 How radical modernity critiques might inform and relate to a liberal degrowth vocabulary**

Can this vocabulary-approach incorporate themes of the more radical modernity critiques as well? In the following, we trace some possible connections.

##### *Heidegger*

Note the essential proximity of Heidegger's *Hervorkommenlassen* approach, of meditative thinking and openness towards nature, to the notions of mindfulness and sufficiency. That the latter exhibit a thoroughly Heideggerian streak can also be seen from the rather poetic closing paragraph of his essay "The Pathway" (1969[1948]: 71):

*Everything speaks of renunciation unto the same. Renunciation does not take away, it gives. It bestows the inexhaustible power of the simple. The call makes us at home in the arrival of a distant origin.*

Indeed, Heideggerian-infused notions such as mindfulness and sufficiency could be key concepts for a liberal degrowth vocabulary. They represent a relaxed and, in effect, liberal stance towards life that may yield radical consequences nonetheless – if large numbers of people choose to live and vote by it. Also, note how the recent modernity critique by Rosa (2016) focuses on the impoverished relations of man towards oneself, towards others and towards nature – and thus exhibits similarities to Heidegger. In Rosa’s terminology, processes of *social acceleration* lead to alienation (self-alienation and social alienation, both in spatial and temporal respects). This alienation does not imply an essentialist notion of moving away from some “true” nature of human being, but rather points to the neglected and diminished capabilities of responsive relating to the world. When we are alienated from the world, it appears silent and cold, devoid of meaning. Note that the processes of social acceleration that beget alienation are ambivalent – their negative effects notwithstanding, they are partly beneficial. In consequence, slowing down is no panacea; in some respects, such as internet access, acceleration is indeed beneficial. Hence, Rosa (2016) strikes a Heideggerian chord when he advocates “resonance” as a remedy: when we cultivate an attitude of openness towards others and towards nature (instead of a controlling, calculating stance), we create possibilities for meaningful relations of “resonance” that need to be re-invigorated for a meaningful life.

### *Marcuse*

From the liberal perspective of this paper, Marcuse’s reasoning is often problematic because he basically politicizes Heidegger’s juxtaposition of authenticity vs. inauthenticity. Following Marcuse’s interpretation, overcoming inauthenticity and the ensuing (self-)alienation requires radical action – political action. Yet Marcuse’s take at (self-)alienation has been criticized in subsequent literature because of its paternalistic vein – how is it possible that “self-alienated” people can be quite satisfied with their supposedly “wrong” lives and who dares to say what their “non-alienated” self should look like? (Jaeggi 2016). At first sight, this can hardly be compatible with liberalism.

That said, a liberal degrowth vocabulary might benefit from Marcuse’s “spirit of refusal”. In a way, Marcuse may fuel the intrinsic motivation that in practice is necessary to “defend the lifeworld” against colonization from systemic imperatives. It takes some nerve to follow Marcuse’s path of obstinacy and refusal. Any reader of both Habermas and Marcuse will concur that the latter’s rather than the former’s works lend themselves to inspire practical action. But language is practice. Vocabularies without practical consequences are

meaningless. It is not by chance that Marcuse was the most popular influence from critical theory among the students who protested in 1968; since then, Marcuse has inspired protest movements worldwide due to his promotion of the “Great Refusal” (see Lamas et al. 2017), that is, tactics of subversion and civil disobedience that may undermine institutional repression.

Thus, in analogy to Rorty’s question “can we pragmatists appropriate all of Heidegger except his nostalgia, or is the nostalgia integral to the story he is telling?” (Rorty 1991: 47), we ask “can we liberals appropriate Marcuse’s enthusiasm without incurring his existentialist view of politics and his normative pretension?” As Rorty argues with respect to Heidegger, we think this question, too, can be answered affirmatively.

### *Illich*

Illich’s convivial approach towards social and technological tools has already been widely received in the degrowth literature (e.g. Deriu 2015, Samerski 2016), so we will not discuss it in more detail here. Instead, we might briefly highlight two similarities to the other critiques of modernity discussed here. First, Illich’s conviviality approach aims to keep technology in check, so that it does not become an end in itself. This directly links to Heidegger’s approach of releasement with respect to technology. Both conviviality and releasement serve to counter the loss of individual autonomy and the encroachment of technology. Second, Illich’s focus on autonomy, skills and self-empowerment might help to defend the lifeworld against systemic colonization. Hence, here as well, some aspects of the more radical Illich might nonetheless inform and add to a Habermasian pursuit of the project of modernity.

### *The Dark Mountain Manifesto*

The parallel between the manifesto and the vocabulary approach discussed here is obvious. Both suggest that changing the stories we tell ourselves is a fundamental precondition for broader societal change. There might also be some overlap concerning the stories’ content, such as questioning the anthropocentric base of the progress narrative might keep technological hubris in check and foster environmental values. Still, the approach advocated here is, overall, more optimistic as it presupposes that one can talk in a non-self-deceptive way about sustainable civilization.

### *From vocabularies to institutional change*

Numerous degrowth policies (e.g. advertising bans or salary caps) await their implementation in practice (Cosme et al. 2017: 326). One might trace this back to the hegemony of the growth paradigm (Schmelzer 2016). Understanding this hegemony as a cultural phenomenon, an alternative paradigm will be required to oust the growth paradigm (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2000). Of course, this poses a chicken-and-egg dilemma. Let us illustrate this with the example of sufficiency. On the one hand, “the politics of sufficiency” (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014) requires citizens’ demand for specific changes to policies and institutions (e.g., demanding more cycling routes on the local level, or demanding sustainable agricultural policies on the European Union level); on the other hand, the more cross-cutting sufficiency policies have been implemented, “the easier it will be to live a life based on sufficiency” (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014: 21). Put in a positive way, there may be a self-reinforcing dynamic once the degrowth vocabulary effectively challenges the hegemony of the growth paradigm.

In sum, the more radical critiques of modernity need not necessarily be pushed aside. Committing degrowth to the (unfinished) project of modernity and to liberal democracy, one might still productively draw on some aspects of the radical critiques. Sufficiency for respecting ecological limits, a spirit of refusal and civil disobedience to counter systemic imperatives, conviviality and releasement to prevent technology from becoming an end in itself – all these aspects may well form part of a liberal approach to degrowth. On this basis, expanding the range of people who commonly use notions such as “sufficiency” in their vocabulary over time may yield political majorities for degrowth policies; these policies, in turn, “improve the preconditions for resonance experiences”, thereby bolstering the cultural alternative to the growth paradigm (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014: 16).

#### **4.3 Degrowth vocabulary within a deliberative account of democracy**

Decision-making processes in existing representative democracies are often dominated by vested interests, which limits the immediate power of vocabularies and narratives. This leads, among others, to calls for more direct democracy and a move away from representative democratic institutions. This is problematic for two reasons. First, participatory and more direct institutions are not purely antithetical to self-interest: “Including self-interest in the regulative ideal of deliberative democracy embraces the diversity of human objectives as well as the diversity of human opinions” (Mansbridge et al. 2010: 73; see also Blau 2011). The same holds for power in implementing decisions reached in a deliberative way (Mansbridge et al. 2010: 83ff.). As argued by Sen (2009) and Dryzek (2013), even deliberation in the context

of a Habermasian (1984) “ideal speech situation” need not necessarily lead to a consensus; there remains an irreducible “plurality of impartial reasons”, as partisan actors are still part of deliberative accounts of democracy, and as such they are “best thought of as discursive representatives, representing particular conceptions of justice (possibly sustainability, efficiency, etc.)” (Dryzek 2013: 343). A resulting caveat is that participation and deliberation among free and equal participants may but need not necessarily lead to sustainability (Arias Maldonado 2000; 2007). In consequence, concentrating on idealized, transcendental concepts such as perfect justice, true democracy etc., does not help us much in actually making the world less unjust (Sen 2009) – the deliberative, post-capitalist democracy may be a worthwhile regulative idea, but plurality of interests, power relations etc. cannot simply be “overcome”.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, human fallibility is a fundamental reason for liberalism: that we never can be sure that we are “right”, that we know the “truth” or what “authentic” life is (Mill 1859). Funke et al. (2017: 9), paraphrasing Marcuse, claim that in today’s consumer societies “affluence and technological rationality replace freedom and authentic individuality” – but who decides what counts as “authentic individuality”? Acknowledging that we may be wrong implies liberalism and makes convincing others (e.g. by means of promoting vocabularies) the only legitimate mode of societal change.

The second limitation of participatory approaches to democracy, particularly direct democracy, lies in the high requirements they pose for citizens. Willingness to participate, cognitive capacities, time constraints have been invoked as reasons speaking in favour of the “second-best solution” (where the first-best direct democracy is unrealistic) of representative democracy (Parvin 2018). However, in order for vocabularies to spread into the institutional sphere and trigger societal change, there is of course a need for *improving* representative democracy, which has become rather unresponsive and conservative. This can be achieved by complementing representative democratic institutions by both structured-formalised and informal public deliberation (Habermas 1996; Lafont 2017; Parvin 2018; Sen 2009).

Does all this imply relegating change exclusively to the individual sphere? Only in the sense that institutional change needs individual consent, but not in the sense that all activity must start from the individual. Analogously, the “merit good” literature discusses how corrections of individual preferences can be justified by reflective preferences or retroactive consent,

---

<sup>7</sup> Generally, as Ott (2012) points out, *theories of* democracy must be broad enough to be conceptually neutral with respect to specific political movements. By implication, “there can and should be no [degrowth]-theory of democracy” (Ott 2012: 576), but some theories of democracy address the shortcomings of existing liberal democracies in ways compatible with the degrowth agenda (see also Arias Maldonado 2000).

amongst other reasons (see the overview in Hoberg and Strunz 2018). Overall, the point is not to *a priori* rule out radical change but to ensure that the latter is democratically legitimated and driven by persuasion rather than imposed by force and violence. Hence, Gorz's "non-reformist reforms" (1964), that is, fundamental changes to the economic structure that follow human needs rather than needs of the economic system, may well be in line with the approach defended here (even though other notions of Gorz, such as the aforementioned attack against "technofascism", seem less compatible).

The degrowth movement rhetorically embraces its own diversity – but this very diversity also entails different conceptions of what is to be considered as just, sustainable, true or authentic. Hence, liberalism should be a basic tenet of a degrowth movement if the spectre of authoritarianism re-entering through the back door is to be avoided: "some risk-aversion and skepticism against utopias<sup>8</sup> might be more helpful for the [degrowth] movement than radical chic" (Ott 2012: 580). One such utopia appears to be the notion of man returning to his (and her) natural place in the world (cf. Eversberg and Schmelzer 2017: 31). For if the preferred narratives of human civilization are purely negative (alienation, exploitation, technofascism, etc.), does this not imply a rather idealized conception of *état de nature*? How can such a perspective be justified, given the evidence that even hunter-gatherers significantly impacted on nature, to the point of megafaunal extinction (e.g. van der Kaars et al. 2017; see also Bocherens 2018)? A similar issue concerns the popular notion of communal democracy (e.g. Escobar 2015): how can diversity be assured against the patterns of tight social control in local communities, against "local parochialism" (Sen 2009) or communal violence (Quilley 2013: 279; see also Diamond 2012: chap. 4)?

All this does not mean that a commitment to modernity and liberal democracy has to cling to the status quo. On the contrary, commitment to political liberalism may well align with or even demand radical economic reconfigurations to improve distributional and ecological justice (Ferguson 2016: 612f.): "liberal democracies can and often must place limits upon the kind of preferences they realize, including preference for economic growth. For whilst growth might have once furthered a range of liberal objectives, it now threatens to undermine liberal institutions by destroying the conditions of socio-economic equality and ecological stability upon which they are predicated." Obviously, various institutional adaptations will be required to support an ecologically sound, more equitable modernity – all within and supported by a liberal democratic framework. For two concrete examples, consider absolute restrictions on

---

<sup>8</sup> See also Agnes Heller's (2016) case against utopianism – and for the merit of dystopian thinking.

resource use or community-based approaches to universal healthcare that provide individualized, localized basic care funded by national welfare states. Therefore, it is not liberal institutions that are problematic, it is the vested interests that instrumentalize them; there are strong liberal reasons to tackle widespread injustice and other hypertrophies of modernity (Sen 2009; Habermas 1984, 1987; Popper 2011[1945]: 119). Certainly, these threats and the danger of instrumentalization are inherent features of liberal democracy of whatever type; they are the price for liberal freedom of the individual. The argument here is that also from the point of view of degrowth's own goals (e.g. autonomy, emancipation, etc.), they are a price worth paying.

An important corollary is that while the degrowth movement should have a vision of a post-growth society, the basic democratic tenets of individual freedom and legitimacy of collective institutions require that this vision be only an orientation for a societal debate; in other words, it must be allowed that the democratic processes lead to an institutional arrangement that differs from the original degrowth vision (cf. Arias-Maldonado 2000). This attitude is embodied by the Rortian (1989) "liberal hope" that (deliberative) democratic processes will lead to the adoption of a degrowth vocabulary and, thus, to a transition towards sustainability. In other (Rorty's) words, a deliberative approach consists in replacing "blows by words" or, in Habermas's terms, in focusing on communicative reason in trying to reach *a* (not *the*) sustainable, post-growth world (Nižnik and Sanders 1996: 28).

In sum, the degrowth movement may present its case in a liberal framing, advertising the multiple positive effects of personal and institutional change. Recent discussions on how to improve the popularity and attractiveness of degrowth vocabulary (e.g. Drews and Antal 2016) are very welcome in this respect. Certainly, the process of activating or constructing the right frames, that is the unconscious structures guiding our thinking, is long and arduous (Lakoff 2010): propagating new vocabulary does not quickly deliver transformative change because the existing frames may have become institutionally reified, continuously defended by vested interests. So far, the degrowth agenda does not enjoy any consent among the broader population (Buch-Hansen 2018). This, however, gives all the more reason for the degrowth movement to popularize vocabularies that can legitimate institutional change.

## 5 Conclusion

The degrowth movement has developed out of a critique of modernity's hypertrophies. Such critiques often exhibit an ambivalent stance, implying that some aspects of modernity are to be kept, others to be rejected. Nonetheless, the radical currents of modernity critique within

the degrowth movement tend to dismiss the institutions of liberal democracies as failed, corrupted and democracy-in-name-only.

In contrast, we propose to conceive of degrowth as a liberal project (including the option of radical change via reform, cf. Gorz 1964); drawing upon Rorty's social hope based on changing vocabularies and Sen's and Habermas' deliberative understanding of democracy, we showed that not only is this approach compatible with a liberal conception of democracy, "not giv[ing] lightly up hope that by such means as argument and careful observation, people may reach some kind of agreement on many problems of importance; and that, even where their demands and their interests clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals" (Popper 2011[1945]: 431); it also lays out a potential road towards realization, since by promoting new vocabularies majorities for the degrowth project can be created.

While this approach explicitly follows Habermas' call to carry on the "unfinished project of modernity", the resulting degrowth vocabulary might also productively draw on some aspects of the more radical modernity critiques that have been exemplarily presented in this paper:<sup>9</sup>

- Heidegger's ethos of releasement has recently been introduced into the degrowth literature (Heikkurinen 2016). His (late) writings may further nurture a vocabulary of self-sufficiency, mindfulness and openness towards nature.
- Marcuse's critique of the affluent consumer society provides less in terms of specific terms and concepts but more in terms of practice and attitude – the Habermasian "defence of the lifeworld" against systemic imperatives may benefit from Marcuse's spirit of refusal.
- Illich's convivial approach towards social and technological tools has already been widely received in the degrowth literature (e.g. Deriu 2015, Samerski 2016). On this basis, technology might be relegated back to its original function as a means for specific ends.

On a second level, the degrowth movement may benefit from the radical critiques of modernity by avoiding to repeat their mistakes. Specifically, the main lesson to be drawn is that existentialist vocabularies (e.g., truth and authenticity), if employed in the political domain, may unintentionally endanger liberal values (cf. Heidegger's Nazism and Marcuse's non-condemnation of violence). Therefore, such vocabularies should be confined to the realm

---

<sup>9</sup> Certainly, other modernity critiques not addressed in this paper could also inform a liberal approach to degrowth. Only the most radical critiques of modernity, such as Zerzan's primitivist group, can hardly be reconciled with any enlightened account of degrowth (Demaria et al. 2013: 209).

of self-creation (cf. Illich's hope for institutional inversion), inspiring the refusal to conform with systemic pressures as a personal virtue.

Let us briefly consider two obvious objections to the approach sketched here.<sup>10</sup> First, the idea that changing vocabularies entails changing institutions, naturally sits at odds with Marx-inspired views that highlight the primacy of economic structures – any effort to change vocabularies seems futile if, by assumption, they only mirror economic structures. By comparison, the post-Marxist calls for building a new hegemony (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 2000) lie closer to and may even directly relate to the approach favoured here. Second, in practice, promotion of vocabularies proceeds slowly. Political majorities will not be created quickly. Hence, it is not certain that the liberal approach will prevent crossing of planetary boundaries in time or that it will achieve all of degrowth's goals.<sup>11</sup> Still, given that many of these goals are related to human autonomy, freedom and “good life”, it would be unwise to throw out the “baby” (i.e. the constitutive elements of a liberal democracy, as defined in Section 1) with the “bathwater” (i.e. modernity's hypertrophies such as excessive instrumental rationalism).

Particularly, the third element of liberal democracy, i.e. institutions that allow for corrections of the societal course of action on the basis of public discourse, may inadvertently come under pressure if a there-is-no-sustainable-alternative mantra were to substitute for the neoliberal there-is-no-alternative mantra (Buch-Hansen 2014: 172). This seems all the more important because degrowth's grassroots origins notwithstanding, “the majority of degrowth proposals [...] follow a top-down approach” in that they “require direct control by governments [...], which suggests the need for a high level of state intervention to pursue a degrowth transition” (Cosme et al. 2017: 149).

As regards the prospects for such political interventions, we agree with Kallis et al. (2012:178) that radicalism may play an important strategic role, too:

*What about labour and women rights, the 40 hours' workweek, social security or free healthcare? Weren't these unthinkable reforms at the time that compromised the profits of powerful vested interests? [...] In many cases such radical agendas have come through*

---

10 Generally, note again that a vocabulary differs from a “theory” in that it neither claims to root in a coherent set of assumptions nor to explain a specific empiric phenomenon.

11 Degrowth goals may be clustered along three dimensions, (i) reducing the environmental impact of humans, (ii) redistributing wealth more equitably and (iii) promoting the transition from a materialistic to a convivial and participatory society (Cosme et al. 2017).

*electoral and social pressure [...] it takes radical agendas to take power in order to bring about reformist policies.*

In a sense, this paper fosters and sharpens this message: the degrowth movement rightly aims to correct the hypertrophies of modernity but it should be more explicit about i) which of liberal democracy's and, more generally, modernity's basic tenets it intends to keep and ii) how this is to be ensured.

Eventually, the spectre of authoritarianism is often quite clear to see for those who want to see it. Consider that already in 1918, the socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg condemned the Bolsheviks' dissolution of the Russian Constituent Assembly in Saint Petersburg – her clear-sighted judgement should alert all those who casually dismiss currently existing liberal democracies as failed:<sup>12</sup>

*To be sure, every democratic institution has its limits and shortcomings, things which it doubtless shares with all other human institutions. But the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people.*

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Magnus Neubert and four anonymous referees for valuable comments on earlier versions of the manuscript. The usual disclaimer applies.

## **Literature**

Arias-Maldonado, M. 2000. The democratisation of sustainability: The search for a green democratic model. *Environmental Politics* 9(4): 43-58. doi:10.1080/09644010008414550

Arias-Maldonado, M. 2007. An imaginary solution? The green defence of deliberative democracy. *Environmental Values* 16(2): 233-252. doi:10.3197/096327107780474573

Arrow, K. 1951. *Social choice and individual values*. New York:Wiley.

Asara, V., Profumi, E., Kallis, G. 2013. Degrowth, Democracy and Autonomy. *Environmental Values* 22: 217-239. doi:10.3197/096327113X13581561725239

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch04.htm>.

- Bailey, D. 2015. The Environmental Paradox of the Welfare State: The Dynamics of Sustainability. *New Political Economy* 20(6): 793–811. doi:10.1080/13563467.2015.1079169
- Bennet, J. 2006. Modernity and its Critics. in: Dryzek, J. Honig, B., Phillips, A. (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, Oxford University Press: 211-224.
- Bina, O., Mateus, S., Pereira, L., Caffa, A. 2017. The future imagined: Exploring fiction as a means of reflecting on Grand Societal Challenges and tomorrow's options. *Futures* 86: 166-184. doi:10.1016/j.futures.2016.05.009
- Blau, A. 2011. Rationality and deliberative democracy: A constructive critique of John Dryzek's democratic theory. *Contemporary Political Theory* 10(1): 37-57. doi:10.1057/cpt.2010.3
- Bocherens, H. 2018. *The Rise of the Anthroposphere since 50,000 Years: An Ecological Replacement of Megaherbivores by Humans in Terrestrial Ecosystems?* *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 6. doi:10.3389/fevo.2018.00003
- Browne, M. 2016. Slavoj Žižek: Trump is really a centrist liberal. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/28/slavoj-zizek-donald-trump-is-really-a-centrist-liberal>.
- Buch-Hansen, H. 2014. Capitalist diversity and de-growth trajectories to steady-state economies. *Ecological Economics* 106: 167-173. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2014.07.030
- Buch-Hansen, H. 2018. The prerequisites for a de-growth paradigm shift: insights from critical political economy. *Ecological Economics* 146: 157-163. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.10.021
- Cooper, D.E. 2005. Heidegger on Nature. *Environmental Values* 14: 339-351.
- Cosme, I., Santos, R., O'Neill, D. 2017. The degrowth discourse: A review and analysis of academic policy proposals. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 149: 321-334. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.02.016
- D'Alisa, G., Demaria, F., Kallis, G. (eds.) 2015. *Degrowth. A Vocabulary For a New Era*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Daly, H.E., 1996. *Beyond growth: The economics of sustainable development*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Demaria, F., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., Martinez-Alier, J. 2013. What is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement. *Environmental Values* 22: 191-215. doi:10.3197/096327113X13581561725194
- Deriu, M. 2012. Democracies with a future: Degrowth and the democratic tradition. *Futures* 44: 553-561. doi:10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016
- Deriu, M. 2015. Conviviality. In: D'Alisa, G., Demaria, F., Kallis, G. (eds.). *Degrowth. A Vocabulary For a New Era*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 79-82.
- Diamond, J. 2012. *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?* London: Allen Lane.
- Dieleman, S. 2017. What would it mean to call Rorty a deliberative democrat? *Contemporary Pragmatism* 14(3): 319-333. doi:10.1163/18758185-01403005
- Dikötter, F. 2010. *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Drews, S., Miklós, A. 2016. Degrowth: A “missile word” that backfires? *Ecological Economics* 126: 182-187. Doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2016.04.001
- Dryzek, J.S. 2013. The deliberative democrat's Idea of Justice. *European Journal of Political Theory* 12(4): 329-346. doi:10.1177/1474885112466784
- Ericson, T., Kjonstad, B.G., Barstad, A. 2014. Mindfulness and Sustainability. *Ecological Economics* 104: 73-79. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2014.04.007
- Escobar, A. 2015. Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: a preliminary conversation. *Sustainability Science* 10: 451-462. doi:10.1007/s11625-015-0297-5
- Eversberg, D., Schmelzer, M. 2017. The degrowth spectrum: convergence and divergence within a diverse and conflictual alliance. *Environmental Values*, forthcoming. <http://www.whpress.co.uk/EV/papers/1300-Eversberg.pdf>
- Foa, R.S., Mounk, Y. 2017. The signs of deconsolidation. *Journal of Democracy* 28(1): 5-15.
- Ferguson, P. 2016. Liberalism and Economic Growth: A Theoretical Exploration. *Environmental Values* 25: 593-619. doi:10.3197/096327116X14703858759170

Funke, P. Lamas, A., Wolfson, T. 2017. Bouazizi's Refusal and Ours. Critical Reflections on the Great Refusal and Contemporary Social Movements, in: Lamas, A., Wolfson, T., Funke, P. (eds.). *The Great Refusal. Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*. Temple University Press.

García, J.L., Jerónimo, H.M., Carvalho, T.M. 2017. Methodological Luddism: A concept for tying degrowth to the assessment and regulation of technologies. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.03.184

Gomiero, T. 2017. Agriculture and degrowth: State of the art and assessment of organic and biotech-based agriculture from a degrowth perspective. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.03.237

Gorz, A. 1964. *A Strategy for Labor*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Gorz, A. 1980. *Ecology as Politics*. Boston: South End Press.

Gumbrecht, H.-U. 1998. *In 1926. Living on the Edge of Time*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Habermas, J. 1984. *The theory of communicative action, Vol. 1*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. 1987. *The theory of communicative action, Vol. 2*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. 1994[1980]. Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt. Rede aus Anlaß der Verleihung des Adorno-Preises der Stadt Frankfurt 1980. In Welsch, W. (ed.): *Wege aus der Moderne: Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne-Diskussion* (2nd ed.). Berlin: Akademie Verlag: 177-192.

Habermas, J. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Translated by William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Heidegger, M. 1969[1948]. The Pathway. Translated by Thomas F. O'Meara, Revisions by T. Sheehan. In *Heidegger. The Man and the Thinker*, edited by Thomas Sheehan, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, pp. 69-71.

Heidegger, M. 1977[1954]. The Question Concerning Technology. In *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 287-317.

- Heilbroner, R. 1974. *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*. London: Calder & Boyars.
- Heikkurinen, P. 2016. Degrowth by means of technology? A treatise for an ethos of releasement. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.07.070
- Heller, A. 2016. From Utopia to Dystopia: A Story of Historical Imagination, in *Philosophy and History*, ed. Jeremy Gauger, special issue, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 37(2): 289-302.
- Herf, J. 1984. *Reactionary modernism. Technology, culture, and politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoberg, N., Strunz, S. 2018. When individual preferences defy sustainability – can merit good arguments close the gap? *Ecological Economics* 143: 286-293. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.07.004
- Illich, I. 1975. *Tools for Conviviality*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins.
- Illich, I. 1977. *Medical Nemesis. The Expropriation of Health*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Inglehart, R.F., Norris, P. 2016. Trump, Brexit, and the rise of Populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash. *Harvard Kennedy School Research Working Paper Series* 12-026.
- Jaeggi, R. 2016. *Entfremdung. Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Kallis, G., Kerschner, C., Martinez-Alier, J. 2012. The economics of degrowth. *Ecological Economics* 84: 172-180. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2012.08.017
- Kingsnorth, P., Hine, D. 2012. *Uncivilization. The Dark Mountain Manifesto*. <http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/>
- Laclau, E., Mouffe, C. 2000. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd edition. London and New York: Verso.
- Lafont, C. 2017. Can Democracy be Deliberative & Participatory? The Democratic Case for Political Uses of Mini-Publics. *Daedalus* 146(3): 85–105. doi:10.1162/DAED\_a\_00449
- Lakoff, G. 2010. Why it matters how we frame the Environment. *Environmental Communication* 4(1): 70-81. doi:10.1080/17524030903529749
- Lamas, A., Wolfson, T., Funke, P. 2017. *The Great Refusal. Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Mansbridge, J., Bohman, J., Chambers, S., Estlund, D., Follesdal, A., Fung, A., Lafont, C., Manin, B., Martí, J.L. (2010). The place of self-interest and the role of power in deliberative democracy. *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 18(1): 64-100.

Mounk, Y. 2018. *The people vs. democracy. Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Marcuse, H. 1964. *One-dimensional man.* Boston: Beacon.  
<http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/64onedim/odmcontents.html>

Marcuse, H. 1967. “*The End of Utopia*” and “*The Problem of Violence and the Radical Opposition*”. Lectures delivered at the Free University of West Berlin, July 1967.  
<http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/60spubs/67endutopia/67EndUtopiaProbViol.htm#endutopia> (First published in English as: Marcuse, H. 1970. *Five Lectures*, Boston: Beacon).

Marcuse, H. 1968. The Liberation from the Affluent Society. In: David Cooper (ed.), *The Dialectics of Liberation*, Harmondsworth/Baltimore: Penguin, 175-192.

Mill, J. S. 1859. *On Liberty*.

Muraca, B. 2013. Décroissance: A Project for a Radical Transformation of Society. *Environmental Values* 22: 147-169. doi:10.3197/096327113X13581561725112

Muraca, B., Neuber, F. 2017. Viable and convivial technologies: Considerations on Climate Engineering from a degrowth perspective. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.04.159

Nižnik, J., Sanders, J.T. (eds.) 1996. *Debating the State of Philosophy. Habermas, Rorty, and Kolakowski.* Westport: Praeger.

Ophuls, W. 1977. *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity: Prologue to a Political Theory of the Steady State.* San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.

Ott, K. 2012. Variants of De-Drowth and Deliberative Democracy: A Habermasian Proposal. *Futures* 44(6): 571-581. doi:10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.018

Paech, N. 2012. *Liberation from excess: The road to a post-growth economy.* München: Oekom.

Parvin, P. 2018. Democracy Without Participation: A New Politics for a Disengaged Era. *Res Publica* 24(1): 31–52. doi:10.1007/s11158-017-9382-1

- Popper, K. 2011[1945]. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Quilley, S. 2013. De-growth is not a liberal agenda: relocalisation and the limits to low energy cosmopolitanism. *Environmental Values* 22: 261-285.
- Quilley, S. 2017. Navigating the Anthropocene: environmental politics and complexity in an era of limits. In: Victor, P., Dolter, B. (eds.). *Handbook on Growth and Sustainability*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham: 439-470.
- Richardson, J. 2012. *Heidegger*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rorty, R. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R. 1991. Heidegger, Contingency and Pragmatism. In: R. Rorty: *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers Vol. 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 27-49.
- Rorty, R. 1999. On Heidegger's Nazism. In: R. Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books: 190-197.
- Rosa, H. 2016. *Resonanz – Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Samerski, S. 2016. Tools for degrowth? Ivan Illich's critique of technology revisited. *Journal of Cleaner Production*. doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.10.039
- Schmelzer, M. 2016. *The hegemony of growth. The OECD and the making of the economic growth paradigm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schneidewind, U., Zahrnt, A. 2014. *The politics of sufficiency. Making it easier to live the good life*. München: oekom.
- Schwaabe, C. 2005. *Die deutsche Modernitätskrise. Politische Kultur und Mentalität von der Reichsgründung bis zur Wiedervereinigung*. München: Wilhem Fink Verlag.
- Sen, A. 2009. *The idea of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shahar, D.C. 2015. Rejecting Eco-Authoritarianism, Again. *Environmental Values* 24: 345-366. doi:10.3197/096327114X13947900181996
- Trainer, T. 2011. The radical implications of a zero-growth economy. *Real-World Economics Review* 57: 71-82. <http://www.paecon.net/PAERReview/issue57/Trainer57.pdf>

- van Griethuysen, P. 2012. Bona diagnosis, bona curatio: How property economics clarifies the degrowth debate. *Ecological Economics* 84: 262-269. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2012.02.018
- van der Kaars, S., Miller, G., Turney, C., Cook, E., Nürnberg, D., Schönfeld, J., Kershaw, P., Lehman, S. 2017. Humans rather than climate the primary cause of Pleistocene megafaunal extinction in Australia. *Nature Communications* 8: 14142. doi:10.1038/ncomms14142
- Weiss, M., Cattaneo, C. 2017. Degrowth – taking stock and reviewing an emerging academic paradigm. *Ecological Economics* 137: 220–230. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.01.014
- Wheeler, M. 2011. Martin Heidegger. In: Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/heidegger/>
- Zerzan, J. (ed.) 1999. *Against civilization. Readings and Reflections*. Los Angeles: Feral House.