

Farewell to Growth

(trans. David MACEY), Serge LATOUCHE, Polity Press, 2009, ISBN 978-0-7456-4617-6, 14.99 (pbk), 124 pp.

Serge Latouche is a retired professor of economics at the University of Paris-Sud and one of the leading theorists of the emerging movement of de-growth economics that has its main roots among French and Italian ecological thinkers (*dcroissance, decrescita*). This small book serves as a primer to the central tenets and arguments of de-growth. The change of title from the lighter-hearted French *Petit trait de la dcroissance sereine* (2009) to the more militant and allusive *Farewell to Growth* reflects the sense of urgency in injecting the book's key ideas into the English-language context, notably the American, where de-growth is not yet a central topic of ecological discourse. It should be, however, and the book makes the case. (For a broader context than this review can provide, see the website of *European Alternatives*, available online at: <http://www.euroalter.com/2010/beyond-gdp-lies-economic-degrowth>. This is a civil society organization exploring the potential for transnational politics and culture, with an emphasis on ecological issues.)

The arguments of the book are divided into three chapters, preceded by a brief introduction and followed by short conclusions, a bibliography and an index. The critical thrust of the text is primarily economic and political. Above all it drives home that we must both produce and consume less and emphasizes that de-growth is something other than 'negative growth' and can be achieved only 'within the framework of a system that is based upon a different logic' than the economic paradigms dominating so much of global human behaviour (p. 8). De-growth represents a deliberate and ordered retreat from this and offers 'a way of building an autonomous society' (p. 22) where people will 'live better lives whilst working less and consuming less' (p. 9).

The first chapter, 'The territory of de-growth', provides the basic ideas, definitions and demarcations from other concepts, and a bit of history of the movement that harks back to the 1970s, when the Club of Rome report brought home for the first time to a broader audience the fundamental incompatibility of endless growth on a physically limited planet. But it also lists older roots, reaching as far back as Malthus and Podolinsky. The chapter challenges our 'addiction to growth' (p. 16) and calls for the dismantling of the driving mechanisms of our contemporary economics-centred outlook: advertising, credit and built-in product obsolescence (p. 17). De-growth is also set against 'sustainability',

which does not challenge growth, and 'development' is a 'toxic' term (p. 11) for Latouche who points to statistics that show that we 'are already living on credit' (p. 23) in terms of our ecological footprint, have moved far beyond the earth's capacity for regeneration, and thus we would need the equivalent of several more earths for bio-productive space if we were to postulate even a moderate northern lifestyle for the whole global population. De-growth argues against globalization and for a rediscovered localization or regionalization of central aspects of socio-economic activity but criticizes the idea of population reduction in order to re-establish ecological sustainability as flawed as long as dominant economic parameters are not changed first.

In the second chapter, 'A concrete utopia', Latouche gets a bit more specific in what ought to be done. Starting from the incontrovertible premise that '[g]rowth is now a profitable business only if the costs are borne by nature, future generations, consumers' health, wage-earners' working conditions and, above all, the countries of the South' (p. 31), he suggests eight 'R's', measures to change social and economic behaviour (an expandable list) that would lead to a 'virtuous circle of quiet contraction': 're-evaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocate, reduce, re-use and recycle' (p. 33). The chapter explains and illustrates each of these concepts—tinged with a little authorial self-reflection aimed at those who might see 'the systematic recourse to the prefix 're' ... as a hallmark of a reactionary way of thinking, or as a romantic or nostalgic desire to go back to living in the past' (p. 33). Latouche maintains that the 'R's' are simply in response to our current economic system's 'overs', such as 'over-development, over-production, ... over-consumption, over-packaging, ... over-medicalization' (p. 43) and so on. If done right, the suggested changes in human actions would lead to a resurgence in 'conviviality' (p. 42), a concept he borrows from the famous French chef, Brillat-Savarin, as a hedonistic form of what is currently called 'social capital'. 'Local ecological democracy' (p. 44) and 'local economic autonomy' (p. 47) promise to give citizens more control within a life horizon that really matters to them but require first 'a certain decolonization of the imaginary' (p. 53) from the distortions through advertisement. However, a central problem of the proposed de-growth economics is labour, the redistribution of work. Latouche addresses this in the third chapter, together with other concrete and pragmatic issues. This chapter, titled 'A political program', also answers such questions as whether de-growth is possible within capitalism (it is not); points out that de-growth is 'revolutionary' and beyond left or right in a traditional political understanding; and argues against a 'premature institutionalization of the de-growth programme' in the form of a political party (p. 95).

Latouche has nothing to say about existing green parties, but one suspects he does not consider them proponents of de-growth. However, he maintains that de-growth could relatively easily be boiled down into bullet points for an electoral programme, including among others: 'Get back to an ecological footprint equal to or smaller than a planet' (p. 68); 'Relocalize activities'; 'Revitalize peasant culture' (p. 69); 'Encourage the "production" of relational goods, such as friendship and neighbourliness' (p. 70); 'Heavy penalties for spending on advertising' (p. 71); and, related to work and employment as a key area of anticipated resistance to any de-growth programme, notably from the political left in a society that fundamentally determines individuals through work: 'Transform productivity gains into a reduction in working hours and job creation' (p. 69). An important postulate is to decouple 'time that has been liberated from work' from any economic nexus altogether (p. 85).

In sum, de-growth is an intriguing and stimulating mixture of social ideals, economic values and political strategies that amount in their totality to a complete paradigm shift for human action in the world. De-growth is, in fact, not even a humanism (the question addressed in the book's conclusion) or only insofar as humanism is no longer understood as anthropocentric but truly and broadly ecological. Distancing itself from the growth paradigm of capitalism, de-growth incorporates some Marxist social ideals—but overall dismisses Marxism, too, as 'terribly ambiguous' (p. 89) in its critique of modernity, and instead it aims at 'a different logic' altogether: 'De-growth can be regarded as en (*sic!*) "eco-socialism"' (p. 92). But even after specifying that socialism could and should be understood in Andr Gorz's terms as 'the positive response to the disintegration of social bonds ensuing from the commodity and competitive relations characteristic of capitalism' (p. 92), de-growth looks likely to have a steep uphill battle ahead in the American as well as the European context, certainly outside academia. The growth paradigm is just too deeply rooted.

© 2011, Hans J. Rindisbacher

Journal of Contemporary European Studies, vol. 19:1, March 2011, p. 143-145.