

Spatiality of Degrowth

Degrowth is an encompassing concept deriving from different philosophical currents and disciplinary fields (Demaria et al., 2013). Since the first international degrowth conference in Paris in 2008, heated scholarly debates on degrowth have been developed with the primary focus on “economic perspective and a critique of the growth paradigm, as well as the prospects of a degrowth or post-growth-economy” (Muraca, 2013: 148). Various social and political theories are employed to illuminate different aspects of a degrowth society, e.g. democracy, politics, economics. Despite these diverse contributions to both the conceptual and practical development of degrowth, there has been hardly any explicit and systematic engagement with the spatial dimension of a degrowth society. Concerns on the spatiality of degrowth, if any, have been mostly implicitly involved in the degrowth debates as an epiphenomenon of societal change. Such a despatialization of degrowth is reflected in a lack of debates both on space as an object itself hindering and contributing to degrowth transition, and on the interaction between social life and spatial practice, i.e. socio-spatiality, in a degrowth society. This missing engagement with spatiality undermines the coherence and consistency of the degrowth paradigm, giving rise to contradictions in the debates as well as inhibiting collective critical activism (Author, 2013).

This paper is thus a preliminary response to this call for a systematic and distinctive involvement of the spatial dimension in the degrowth transition, i.e. the spatialization of degrowth. In doing so, the paper aims to foreground the emancipatory value of space in degrowth transition. To this end, the paper will include four sections:

Space and Society

The incipient discussion on the dynamics between space and society was made by Lefebvre in the 1970s and then was developed through the work of David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Edward Soja, etc. Based on these distinct but related intellectual projects of spatiality, the discussion here will be made at three levels of abstraction, from ontological realm (*the spatiality of being*), theoretical domain (*socio-spatial dialectic*) to the concreteness of spatial practices in the contemporary capitalist society (*spatiality of capitalism*).

According to Soja (1989), space, time and matter are existential in collectively defining the qualities of being. The subordination and peripheralization of space in degrowth debates thus reflects an incomplete ontological interpretation of human experience. In the socio-spatial dialectic, the organization of space is socially produced which means that space is not just a physical container of social activities, but that spatial structures are bound up with social structures, such as mode of production, division of labor, social relations of production (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]). However, the crucial and fundamental assumption of socio-spatial dialectic is that spatial structures react back upon social relations and modifies the relations of production. As Soja (1989: 81) puts it: “the social

Paper for degrowth conference Sept. 2014

relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent". This attributes to the spatial structure a revolutionary potential that can transform the mode of production. The significance of spatial problematic in societal change is argued by Lefebvre as that "no social revolution can succeed without being at the same time a consciously spatial revolution" (Soja, 1989: 92). Given this transformative potentiality of space, it is also worth exploring the socio-spatial patterning of globalized and neo-liberalized capitalism, in order to find transformative spatial strategies to reach degrowth.

Lefebvre' spatial triad provides a conceptual framework to understand this socio-spatial dialectic. He asserts that social space is produced through dialectical interactions between "spatial practices", "representations of space" and "spaces of representation" as well as their links with social practice (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]). Spatial practices refer to perceived space, revealing the interaction and dynamics between physical space, social organization, people's perception and daily reality. Representations of space are ideologically conceived by professionals and technocrats and are argued as having dominant and substantial role in the production of space. Spaces of representation are lived space of everyday life, representing affection, emotions, passion, action, imagines of inhabitants in lived situation. For Lefebvre, lived space is often intervened, dominated and rationalized by the conceived space. It is this framework that will be employed to shed light on the analysis of the spatiality in different degrowth visions.

Tendencies of degrowth visions

Even though the spatial concern has not been dealt with in the degrowth debates as a distinctive but dependent component of a degrowth society, as mentioned before, it is implied in some degrowth visions. In this section, we will pick up the hidden narratives of space that are implicated in the debates. Among degrowth advocates, localism is widely accepted as a degrowth approach, understood as economic, political and ecological localization. This idea has been shared by many different degrowth projects, although they have different conceptual roots and disagree in many other aspects, e.g. The Simpler Way (Trainer, 2010), Inclusive Democracy (Fotopoulos, 2010), Eco-village (Delambre, 2010), Urban village (Homs, 2007), Bioregionalism (Latouche, 2009). Very few proponents of the above degrowth projects have ever closely examined the spatial consequences and the role of spatial form in fulfilling their visions. With a focus on the issue of spatiality, it can be seen that what is generally embraced in this degrowth localism idea is an anti-urban sentiment and a strong preference for small-scale, decentralized and self-contained human settlements. As shown in the previous discussion on socio-spatial dialect, when space is considered as a factor either shaping, restricting or mediating social reality and a product of social activities, it is thus worth evaluating the current degrowth debates with regard to spatiality in order to explore the potentials of space as a driving force of societal change.

Spatiality of degrowth visions

Taking an evaluative stance would entail a normative view on what is degrowth. According to Demaria et al. (2013), degrowth bears a non-anthropocentric

Paper for degrowth conference Sept. 2014

environmental ethics towards other species, which requires preservation of ecosystems. Secondly, degrowth addresses the limit of bio-capacity and thus arguing for a decrease in human production and consumption level. Thirdly, degrowth calls for the replacement of social relation defined by market and consumerism with giving, receiving, sharing and reciprocity (Bonaiuti, 2012). Fourthly, degrowth arises from an aspiration for deeper democracy. Finally, degrowth is about environmental justice across space and time.

The analysis on the spatiality of the different degrowth visions can be built up upon exploring two questions: (1) what kinds of space are produced by the different visions in degrowth debates? and (2) how do the different spatialities facilitate the achievement of degrowth? The first question will be answered by employing Lefebvre's conceptual triad, where the landscape of social space in different degrowth imaginations will be unfolded. It will then be followed by a discussion on to what extent these social spaces are in line with a degrowth agenda. Here, the discussion will be linked back to the normative views on degrowth as outcome categories for evaluation.

Space as an integral element of degrowth

Through the discussion above, the paper reveals that degrowth debates and movement have been muted with regard to spatiality from its inception that the inclusion of a theoretical meaningful spatial dimension may shatter many assumptions and approaches, e.g. localism. This final section aims to emphasize the benefit and necessity to include spatiality of degrowth in degrowth imaginations, movements or conceptualizations. The paper not only deconstructs the current despatialized degrowth, but attempts to reconstitute it by incorporating space as a necessary, generative, and integral element of societal transformation. In doing so, this analysis offers deeper insight in qualitative assessment of different degrowth imaginations and can encourage to spread and strengthen degrowth orientation in society.

References

- Bonaiuti, M., 2012. Degrowth: Tools for a complex analysis of the multidimensional crisis. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 23(1), 30-50.
- Delambre, M. G., 2010. Sustainable communities of practice and eco-villages as mediation tool for degrowth process. Conference proceedings of the 2nd Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity.
- Demaria, F., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., Martinez-Alier, J., 2013. What is degrowth? From an activist slogan to a social movement. *Environmental Values* 22(2), 191-215.
- Fotopoulos, T., 2010. Direct democracy and de-growth. *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy* 6(4). On-line access.
- Homs, C., 2007. Localism and the city: the example of "urban village". *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy* 3(1). Online access.
- Latouche, S., 2009. *Farewell to Growth*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Lefebvre, H., 1991[1974]. *The Production of Space*. Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.

Paper for degrowth conference Sept. 2014

Muraca, B., *Décroissance: A project for a radical transformation of society.*
Environmental Values 22(2): 147–169.

Soja., 1989. *Postmodern Geographies. The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory.* London: Verso.

Trainer, T., 2010. *The Transition to a Sustainable and Just World.* Envirobook, Sydney.

Author, 2013. Paper presented at *Spaces and Flows: An International Conference on Urban and ExtraUrban Studies.* Amsterdam.