

Degrowth, Democracy and Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

The quest for real democracy is one of the components of sustainable degrowth. But the incipient debate on democracy and degrowth suffers from general definitions and limited connections to political philosophy and democracy theory. This article offers a critical review of democracy theory within the degrowth literature, taking as its focal point a relevant debate between Serge Latouche and Takis Fotopoulos. We argue that the core of their contention can be traced back to the relationship between the concepts of democracy and autonomy as defined by philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, which both authors and generally the degrowth movement consider as one of their theoretical reference points. We show how both Latouche and Fotopoulos hold a misconception of Castoriadis' notions of autonomy, the social imaginary and politics, which in turn limits their cognisance of democracy and hence confuses their debate concerning the possibilities for a degrowth transition within the confines of a liberal parliamentary democracy. With a clarified theoretical understanding of the interconnected democracy-autonomy assemble, we proceed to an evaluation of the revolutionary potential of the degrowth movement and to a better understanding of a possible relationship between democracy and degrowth.

KEYWORDS

Degrowth, autonomy, direct democracy, revolution, Castoriadis, democracy, social imaginary

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1. INTRODUCTION: DEGROWTH AND DEMOCRACY.

The proposal of degrowth has entered with force academic, social and even political debates. There has been a recent surge of publications on degrowth (see Fournier, 2008; Kallis, 2011; Latouche, 2009; Martinez-Alier, 2009; Martinez-Alier, 2012; Martinez-Alier et al., 2010 and various contributions in Schneider et al., 2010, Cattaneo et al., 2012 and Saed, 2012) and three international conferences with hundreds of participants (www.degrowth.org). Degrowth is a movement that mixes science and activism (Demaria et al., this issue) and in ecological economics has been defined as an equitable and welfare-enhancing downscaling of economic production and consumption (Schneider et al., 2010; Kallis, 2011). The underlying premise is that continuous economic growth is ecologically catastrophic, economically unsustainable (Kallis et al., 2009), and is no longer improving social welfare and happiness (Jackson, 2009).

Degrowth (DG) proponents are eager to associate the proposal with a deeper democracy, given a plausible drift of degrowth towards technocratic or eco-fascist variants due to its grounding on an impending ecological catastrophe that must be avoided at all costs (Romano, 2012). However there are few formulations or conceptualisations of the democracy perspective espoused by the DG paradigm. Although we value heterogeneity of voices and perspectives which enrich the debate (Deriu, 2009), many different claims and mottos have been launched and lumped together in the ‘cauldron of democracy’, and it is time to engage more seriously with differences and contradictions in different positions, if the DG proposal is to evolve. For example, different adjectives have been attached to democracy in relation to degrowth, such as ‘direct’ or ‘inclusive’ (Fotopoulos), ‘participatory’ (Bayon et al., 2010; Latouche, 2009), ‘deliberative’ (Ott, 2012), ‘real’ (Romano, 2012), or ‘representative’ (Cheynet, 2008; Fournier, 2008; Cochet, 2006; Decrop, 2006). We agree with Decrop (2006: 85, authors’ translation) that ‘the appeal for politics and democracy will remain pure invocation without a true return on the notion of democracy itself, on what it is in its essence’. A proper debate is indeed very relevant given what many authors agree is the contemporary democracy crisis (for example, see Bobbio, 1984, 1988; Bovero and Pazé, 2010; Castoriadis, 2010a; Crouch, 2004; Dalton, 2004; Gauchet, 2007; Macpherson, 1977; Rosanvallon, 2006). This article is a first attempt to address this literature gap. Towards this end, we go back to the intellectual roots of the degrowth movement, and revisit the referent work of Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis (1922–1997) had a fascinating life and intellectual history, including escaping Greece to Paris after the defeat of the Left in the Greek civil war and working for decades as an economist for OECD while participating with a pseudonym in the revolutionary collective *Socialism or Barbarism*. A truly trans-disciplinary scholar, he was trained in economics, psychoanalysis, politics and philosophy, elements of which he combined in his voluminous work. His work has constituted an

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important reference for many authors in the degrowth movement. In this article we argue that Castoriadis' theoretical edifice offer a reasonable basis for linking degrowth and democracy and answering critical questions about the nature and scope of degrowth as a political project.

Our analysis of Castoriadis' contribution is framed in conversation with the work and recent exchange between Serge Latouche, one of the most prominent exponents of degrowth, and Takis Fotopoulos, a 'critical supporter of degrowth'¹ and founder of the concept of inclusive democracy. Their contrasting perspectives represent divergent opinions within the DG movement, roughly between what may be caricatured as a more reformist (Latouche) and a more revolutionary (Fotopoulos) path. Interestingly, while their views on democracy differ, they both frame their analysis in allegiance to Castoriadis' theory. As we will argue, a careful reading of Castoriadis does not support either of the two interpretations, but instead provides a more sound basis for understanding a fecund possible relationship between democracy and degrowth.

Section 2 briefly presents the works of Fotopoulos and Latouche and discusses their exchange in the *International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*.² Section 3 presents the key conceptual blocks of Castoriadis' intellectual edifice, and section 4 revisits the debate under the light of Castoriadis' philosophy. Section 5 concludes with the implications of Castoriadis' theory for degrowth and democracy.

2. CONTRASTING VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY AND DEGROWTH: THE FOTOPOULOS-LATOUCHE DEBATE

Fotopoulos and the Inclusive Democracy proposal

For Fotopoulos (2005a) liberal Western societies are facing an inter-dependant economic, ecological, social and cultural crisis the roots of which are the uneven concentration of power, itself consequence of the non-democratic organisation of society, institutionalised in the market system and representative democracy. Representative democracy and the market economy are for Fotopoulos two sides of the same coin, heteronomous modernity. Far from conceiving of economic freedom as an indispensable means toward the

1. Although Fotopoulos is sympathetic towards degrowth, having written on the topic and contributing to the International Conference on Degrowth in Barcelona (see http://www.barcelona.degrowth.org/uploads/media/Fotopoulous-democracy_en.pdf), he has also expressed critical views on degrowth, maintaining that it alone is inadequate to deal with the multidimensional crisis (Fotopoulos, 2005a, 2010). At the same time, Fotopoulos acknowledges that there are important similarities between the aims of inclusive democracy and degrowth, i.e. the 'move away from the present growth economy and society' through localism and decentralisation (ibid).
2. This took place on the occasion of the review by Latouche (2005) of Fotopoulos' book *The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy* (Fotopoulos, 2005a).

achievement of political freedom (Friedman, 1962) and far from linking economic development and democracy (Lipset, 1960), Fotopoulos argues that liberal democracies are the instrument through which the merchant (bourgeois) class managed to secure its interests against those of other classes through control of the emerging Nation-State. Given that the market system is growth-enhancing and given that the market system and representative democracy are interwoven and complementary, it follows that the degrowth transition would also be a transition out of liberal democracy (ibid). Nonetheless degrowth in Fotopoulos' view is only one aspect of a wider process of change (a likely outcome of inclusive democracy, see below).

Following Castoriadis, Fotopoulos perceives the crisis and the potential solutions to it in terms of a historical conflict between what he calls the 'autonomy/democratic tradition' and the 'heteronomy tradition'. The first is defined as the striving for 'equal distribution of all forms of power, particularly political and economic power' (ibid: 3). Autonomy is related to the historical examples of ancient Athens, the French revolution, and the Paris or Spanish civil war communes. Heteronomy instead is associated with forms of 'social organisation based on the concentration of power' (ibid: 3).

From this conceptualisation of a conflict between autonomy and heteronomy follows Fotopoulos' proposal of inclusive democracy (ID). ID is a 'liberatory project' involving the abolition of unequal distribution of political and economic power. The term 'inclusive' refers to the inclusion of four forms of democracy: political, economic, social and ecological. For the political dimension, Fotopoulos proposes a future society of a 'confederation of *demoi*, that is communities run on the basis of direct political democracy' (ibid: 7–8), which, geographically may encompass a town and the surrounding villages' (ibid: 205). Economic democracy is necessary so that each citizen has the same resources and capacities to participate in the making of decisions. The means of production and distribution are to be collectively owned and directly controlled by the *demos*. Confederalism would assure a decentralisation of horizontally interdependent and economically self-reliant *demoi*. Although Fotopoulos claims that 'it is up to the citizens' assemblies of the future to design the form an inclusive democracy will take', he dwells on sketching out in details his economic model to 'demonstrate that such a form of society is not only necessary (...), but feasible as well' (ibid: 221). Its main features are 'a stateless, moneyless and marketless economy that precludes private accumulation of wealth and the institutionalisation of privileges for some sections of society' (ibid.: 223). This will be implemented with a combination of democratic planning for basic needs and the substitution of money-based market exchange with a system of vouchers issued on a personal basis, conceived to securing freedom of choice.

In the social realm, democracy will be fostered through institutional arrangements, which level out hierarchical conditions in the household,

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workplace and elsewhere. The radical change brought about by ID is also expected to lead to changes in the human attitude towards nature (through for example the phasing out of the grow-or-die dynamics and of hierarchical relations, and the localist character of the confederal democracy).

Fotopoulos argues that the ID transition should start by contesting local elections and replacing existing institutions with ID ones having in mind the universal vision proposed. Importantly, the project should be as inclusive as possible, bringing together the victims of the market economy and all those concerned about the destruction of the environment and the accelerating deterioration in the quality of life.

Latouche's vision

Like Fotopoulos, Latouche also sees a multi-dimensional crisis, at the heart of which is the failing 'religion' of economic development. Like Fotopoulos, the concept of 'autonomy' is central in Latouche's analysis, so that 'degrowth is a philosophy-founder of the project of an autonomous society' (Latouche, 2008: 118) and 'completes Castoriadis' vision of an auto-instituted society' (Latouche, 2011: 132). Autonomy is understood in its etymological and strong sense (*auto* = self, *nomos* = law): an autonomous entity is one that 'governs itself with its own laws'. This contrasts to governing by the allegedly natural laws of markets or the diktats of modern techno-science and experts. Degrowth therefore for Latouche, meaning liberation from an externally-posed, not-to-be-questioned, objective of economic growth, is part and parcel of the movement towards autonomy. Latouche links Illich's emphasis on autonomy through frugality and conviviality and the Castoriadian ideas of self-limitation and *phronesis* (prudence) in the techno-scientific field.

Compared to Fotopoulos, Latouche makes more use of a second key Castoriadian idea: the social imaginary. His degrowth motto is to 'decolonise the imaginary', i.e. to exit from the social imaginary significations of 'economism', growth, development and consumerism. This is intended as renouncing 'economic science as an independent and formalised discipline' and 're-embedding the economy within the social and ecological realms' (Latouche, 2011: 75 and Latouche, 2008: 111). Latouche argues that autonomy and decolonisation of the imaginary are intrinsically linked to each other: in order to gain autonomy we need to decolonise the imaginary through a profound *self-transformation*.

Latouche's vision is one of a society of 'frugal abundance' (i.e. well-being as opposed to well-having), founded upon a self-limitation of needs. Latouche calls the envisioned degrowth society a 'concrete utopia', 'a source of dream and hope' able to re-open the possibility for invention and creative imaginary, because 'without the hypothesis of another possible world, there is no politics' (Latouche, 2008: 43). To characterise it, he uses a schema of 8

Rs: re-evaluate, reconceptualise, restructure, re-localise, redistribute, reduce, reuse, recycle. Re-evaluation, re-localisation and reduction (of consumption), have a special status, the first representing the essence of the decolonisation of the imaginary, and the latter representing a recipe for ‘making better and more with less’ (Latouche, 2008: 74). Relocalisation is envisioned at the level of bioregions, with environmental and social benefits, including more opportunities for democracy and participation in decisions. Compared to Fotopoulos, Latouche stresses the importance of cultural differences and calls for a pluriversal approach of a ‘democracy of cultures’: degrowth is not an alternative but a ‘matrix of alternatives’, a ‘pedagogic scheme rather than a political programme’ (Latouche, 2009: 175–176; Latouche, 2011: 104).

Degrowth is then in Latouche’s work about re-appropriating the political dimension, and creating opportunities for joint decisions of self-limitation, that are impossible under the current rule of the markets. Latouche remains sympathetic to representative democracy, despite its shortcomings, which he feels can be improved with injections of localisation and participatory democracy. Latouche’s degrowth transition passes through a ‘quasi-electoral programme’ (without a political party) made up of a blueprint of concrete proposals including among others: cutback of the ecological footprint through a drastic reduction of intermediate consumption (transport, energy, advertisement), restoring peasant agriculture, distributing productivity gains into work-time reductions and increases in the number of jobs.

The transition programme of degrowth implies a true subversion of the existing order, and the conditions for its realisation go hand-in-hand with the decolonisation of the imaginary that it facilitates (Latouche, 2008: 93). He also calls for the parallel development of alternative (non)economic spaces here and now, in the form of production-consumption cooperatives, subsistence oriented food gardens, collectives, self-organised systems of housing, education and health, etc., that can gradually grow and occupy a progressively larger part of society. Seemingly, he is also very favourably inclined towards ethnogenetic ‘exit’ experiments, such as the Zapatistas. While on the one hand, the Nation-State remains Latouche’s reference, on the other he advocates a bioregional re-organisation and selective, collective ‘exits from the economy’.

The debate between Latouche and Fotopoulos

Latouche and Fotopoulos agree in much: they both see a multi-dimensional crisis with a strong ecological dimension and they both envisage a transition to a more localised and more democratic frugal society. On the occasion however of a review of Fotopoulos’ book, and Latouche’s (2005) characterisation of the ID proposal as ‘refreshingly naïve’, many of their differences emerged. Let us focus here on three differences that touch the heart of debates about degrowth and democracy: their views on direct democracy; their difference

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on the revolutionary character of the transition; and their disagreement on whether an alternative proposal has to be a universalist one.

In his review, Latouche questions whether there is the popular desire for direct democracy that Fotopoulos assumes, as the masses could be glad that someone 'looks after their private affairs' (Latouche, 2005). Furthermore, Latouche questions whether the 'magic wand of direct democracy' will address economic inequalities and whether power structures can ever be fully eliminated (*ibid.*). He argues that it is more democratic to be governed by elected representative officers than by demagogues that could assume power in a direct democracy system because of the indifference of the majority to participation. His arguments against direct democracy and the Marxist myth of a 'society transparent to itself' draw from a criticism of the 'total citizen', the Rousseauian individual called to participate from morning to evening to exert his duties of citizen, while instead it would be much better to leave spare time for leisure, conviviality, love and idleness (Latouche, 2009: 175). Representative democracy is according to Latouche, part of our tradition, hence it should not be abolished but improved with popular referendums, recallable officers, civil society initiatives and direct participation in some cases. Fotopoulos' (2005b) response is that Latouche misses the multi-dimensional nature of the ID proposal. Fotopoulos, responding to an example mobilised by Latouche, argues that ancient Athens was an incomplete democracy because it addressed only political and not economic or social inequalities (note the role of women and slaves in Athenian society). Athenians could not wholly participate in the *ecclesia* not because of a lack of interest but due to the loss of income associated to participation. Being inclusive of the other democracy components, the ID proposal is one that aspires to fulfil the potential of direct democracy. True, says Fotopoulos, elites and demagogues could capture power in direct democracy when democratic consciousness is lacking; but in representative democracy the deprivation of the vast majority of the population of popular sovereignty is endemic and institutionalised into the system (*ibid.*: 35).

Furthermore, for Fotopoulos a systemic change can never be achieved outside the main political and social arena, as a power base is needed in order to destroy power. Fotopoulos thinks it is naive to hope, as Latouche does, that degrowth somehow could emerge within parliamentary democracies, given their interdependence with capitalism, and given that capitalism has to grow or die. Latouche however is sceptical that the capitalist system can be confronted upfront and overthrown, to establish the revolutionary alternative regime that Fotopoulos proposes. Ascribing to an ethics of responsibility rather than conviction, Latouche argues that the search for good is not the search for absolute good but for the lesser evil, and the task of political realism should be to contain evil within the horizon of good. Politics cannot but be reformist; if not, it will sink into terrorism. For Latouche this necessary pragmatism does not mean renouncing the objectives of the concrete utopia. Degrowth is a revolutionary

proposal in that it challenges the dominant imaginary, but its electoral transition programme cannot but be reformist.

Latouche, an economic anthropologist, declares his uneasiness with universalist proposals for concrete utopias of the type put forward by Fotopoulos, which reveal ‘residuals of Western ethnocentrism’ (Latouche, 2005: 5). To the perspective of a ‘world democracy’ Latouche contrasts the ‘more realistic’ proposal of local small democracies (*politie*) or ‘democracy of cultures’, which would aim not at the idea of a unified humanity, but at a ‘social trade’ of a diversity of cultures (Latouche, 2009). Fotopoulos instead declares his aversion to the postmodernist relativism that has led to the rejection by most of the Left of any kind of universalist project for a radical social change and to what Castoriadis rightly called ‘generalised conformism’. The market system and representative democracy being a materialisation of a universalist project, they require an alternative universalist project in order to be overthrown (Fotopoulos, 2005b: 36).

The two positions crystallise two different theoretical and political approaches to degrowth and democracy. The first (Latouche) calls for a gradual reformist transition to change first the imaginary, and then the system within, creating an improved and decentralised representative democracy in a pluriverse of cultures. The second (Fotopoulos) calls for a more direct confrontation of the system, and its universal replacement by a stateless and marketless confederation of *demoi* on the basis of direct participation of all citizens. Interestingly, both Fotopoulos and Latouche allude to their intellectual heritage to Castoriadis’ work and mobilise his conceptual framework to structure their analyses. We now turn to an elaboration of this edifice, and then return to see what Fotopoulos and Latouche got right and what wrong from Castoriadis’ thought, reconceptualising hence the degrowth-democracy nexus from a Castoriadian perspective.

3. CASTORIADIS’ INTELLECTUAL EDIFICE

Castoriadis’ long path of philosophical and political reflection, which started in the years of his involvement with *Socialism or Barbarism* brought him gradually to elaborate a unique and complex philosophy of humans, in a series of works starting in the 1960s. We can call it, with him, ‘the philosophy of creation’ (Castoriadis, 1997b). It is not an easy task to summarise in brief Castoriadis’ theory, especially for the non-philosopher reader of this journal. We will still make an attempt, highlighting the key building blocks of Castoriadis’ theory as they relate to debates about degrowth and democracy. Our thesis is that both Fotopoulos and Latouche reduce the Castoriadian concept of autonomy, and its relation to democracy, in equal yet contrary, one to the other, ways. To

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understand why and how, we first have to delve into the meaning of the idea of autonomy and its relation to democracy in Castoriadis' work.

Imaginary, Institution and Autonomy

Castoriadis' mature work developed as a profound critique of the ontology and logic of Hegelian idealism, of Kantian criticism, of Marxism and of the Heideggerian proposal of *Being and Time*. Castoriadis nourished his theory with elements of psychoanalysis, social science, findings from the natural sciences and philosophical reflections in physics and mathematics. His *magnum opus*, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (IIS) (Castoriadis, 1975), is a critique of the rationalist and determinist tradition (embodied mainly in the structuralism that was in vogue at the time of his writing). For Castoriadis, this was not able to grasp the profoundly creative dimension of humanity, expressed in its enormous imaginative capacity. Castoriadis argued that we humans are imaginative and social beings and we are led to continuously create our world, and constituting in this way what he called the *social-historical*. The *social-historical* is the human field, and for this reason the true anthropological and epistemological dimension within which philosophical, scientific or political research must ground itself. To analyse it, he used two ontological pillars: the *radical imaginary* (consisting of the *social imaginary* and the *radical imagination*) and the act of *institution*, understood here not as in the everyday parlance of the term referring to administrative entities or laws, but as a movement of instituting-being instituted.³

For Castoriadis, the continual creation of Institution and the generation of social imaginary significations impose to reality an essential historicity that prevents it from closing itself up, or from fixing itself once and for all, on the base of presumed immutable laws. As Castoriadis (1975: 526) explains, central significations

constitute that which, for a given society, brings into being the co-belonging of objects, acts and individuals which, in appearance, are most heterogeneous. They have no 'referent'; they institute a mode of being of things and of individuals, which relate to them. In themselves, they are not necessarily explicit for the society that institutes them. They are figured through the totality of the explicit institutions of society and the organization of the world as such and of the social world, which these institutions serve to instrument. They condition and orient social doing and representing, in and through which they continue as they are themselves altered.

3. Oversimplifying from Castoriadis, we can understand the radical imaginary as the way human beings create their own World, through a continuing process of emerging new meanings, thanks to imagination and social significations. We can understand Institution as the way we fix our disproportionate capacity to create new images and social meanings. This double process, which creates and fixes our imaginary World, is the movement of instituting-being instituted.

Significations are embodied in institutions, and they are not determined by them. Together with the unconscious representations of radical imagination, which are characterised by an associative logic nondefinable by any innate laws, they give meaning to the entire human existence. The meaning that we attribute to things or people cannot be grasped without significations and representations. But it is also not reducible to an explicit meaning, a simple word or concept. Reality in this sense is at the same time *magmatic* and *ensemblistic-identitarian*,⁴ undetermined because it is determinable due to its openness to sheer creation.⁵ The human creation of the Social-historical, the nature of significations and other anthropological characteristics, guarantee a continuous openness to novelty and human change that constitutes the essential ground for autonomy, although institutions and society tend to be ‘almost necessarily’ quite closed, as it is shown by the majority of societies during history, which are in fact instituted in heteronomy⁶ (like religious, authoritarian and totalitarian societies). This iron closure of the sense of societies and of the rules of living together, thwart change and act as an impediment to the conscious questioning of institutions, which is required for autonomy.

Autonomy is a way to continue the movement for human emancipation; for Castoriadis this is a project, which socio-historically originated in Greece during the 4th–5th centuries B.C. with the creation of philosophy, politics and democracy.⁷ In other words, the quest for human freedom is a social creation that is historically traceable, one that dies, springs up again, surviving up to nowadays in new forms. The autonomy proposal therefore is not a proposal for a new utopia; it expresses the *germ* of explicit and limitless questioning which has continuously been with us creating new social-historic forms such as modern revolutions (American and French).⁸ The project of autonomy is a ‘social-historic proposal’ drawn from the collective forms of autonomy born

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4. Castoriadis explains ontology through two kinds of intertwined logics. The *ensemblistic-identitarian* logic is the basic logic of the living being, constituted of a simple set logic and the rudimental logic of mathematics. The magma’s logic is connected with the infinite and indefinite reality of representation, language, psyche, and social dimension. and it is connected to the creative aspect of existence.
 5. In order to understand the sense of the relation between indetermination and creation, see *Faire et à faire*, in Castoriadis (1997b: 18–19 and 67). On the twofold logic nature of human existence, see Castoriadis (1975).
 6. See the synthesis about autonomy and heteronomy as anthropological aspects for Castoriadis, in Profumi (2010: 121–134). See also Castoriadis, 1999: 168–169 and Castoriadis, 1986: 364–384.
 7. The Castoriadian project of autonomy is built on an idea of autonomy that is completely different from that one espoused by the liberal tradition, and especially from authors that have inspired neoliberal standpoints, such as Hayek (whose theories have been reworked by the ‘Chicago Boys’). If for Castoriadis autonomy is the fruit of the union of freedom and equality with regards to participation to social power, Hayek develops his analyses and proposals from the idea of negative freedom. The ‘freedom of and to’ of Castoriadis is absolutely incompatible with the ‘freedom from’ of Hayek.
 8. See Castoriadis, 1996: 11–28; Castoriadis, 1990: 137–171; Castoriadis, 2005: 17–26.

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across time. Differently from Castoriadis' concrete proposal for 'autonomy' in the economic-political domain, which referred to workers' self-management,⁹ in his philosophy with the word 'autonomy' Castoriadis refers to this wider and more complex human domain. Autonomy shapes in the last resort the twofold human reality, individual and collective, and is embodied historically in diverse *practical-poietic activities*, especially politics and psychoanalysis:

Both the Greek politics and the *kata ton orthon logon* politics can be defined as the explicit collective activity intended to be clear-headed (reflexive and deliberative), that gives itself the object of the institution of society as it is (...).

It is not about bothering the unconscious, the Es will never lend itself to it, and if it does, it would be a suicide, because it is precisely from the unconscious that everything originates. It is a question of not being a slave of the unconscious, that is of being able to stop the way through the expression or act, while being aware of the pulsions and desires that grow in there. It is this subjectivity that can be autonomous and it is this relation that is autonomy (...).

*What is a free, or autonomous society? It is a society that gives itself, effectively and reflexively, its own laws, while knowing that it is doing so.*¹⁰ Who is a free, autonomous individual, given that this is conceivable exclusively in a society where there are laws and power? It is an individual that recognizes in these laws and in this power his own laws and his own power – which, if we want to avoid mystifications, is only possible when there is the full effective possibility to participate to law making and to power wielding.¹¹

Democracy and revolution

Democracy, for Castoriadis, has always meant direct democracy. At the period of *Socialism and Barbarism*, democracy was linked to the programme of the possible socialist revolution. It was understood as a system of soviets and councils that would overcome capitalist alienation, and return to humans the control over the products of their activity (Castoriadis, 1979: 77–79). During the *Socialism and Barbarism* period, Castoriadis considered democracy as a way for making revolution real: revolution as the expression of socialism. With the foundation of the philosophy of human creation, Castoriadis reversed this: revolution can only be the fruit of a political creation that institutes democracy as an autonomous society. Democracy is no longer simply seen as direct democracy in the narrower sense of workers' self-management but it is the self-organisation of society: it is a social regime that institutes collective forms of direct participation in decision-making, and is capable of triggering a general educative process on the base of an effective internalisation of the postulate of

9. Castoriadis (1979: 95-6); Castoriadis (1974: 388).

10. Our emphasis.

11. Castoriadis, 1997b: 65 and 103–104 and Castoriadis, 1990: 204.

political equality.¹² As the Athenian democracy attests, democratic institutions are a complex network of spaces and moments, bearers of significations and values that organise participation of the community to public affairs (principally the *ecclesia*, the *agorà* and the *boulé*) allowing every citizen to have the same capability and responsibility to participate to the collective creation and to law making. For example, equality before the law, *isonomia*, was not only a political choice or a rule of the game in ancient Athens, but an institution that had been maintained thanks to an ethos that generalised and valued the freedom of speech (*isegoria*), the attribution of equal weight to citizens' voices in the assembly (*isopsèphia*) and the moral duty to talk frankly (*parrhèsia*) (Castoriadis, 1986: 261–307). Hence democracy is the social regime where collective power is sovereign, and where citizens are aware that it is themselves who set the limits to their own power. Castoriadis continuously defines democracy as the 'self-limitation regime' (Castoriadis, 1999: 150). Democracy is not only an institutional model or a regime; it is an autonomous society itself. As in any society, so the Athenian democracy instituted a type of human subject, a specific individual character who was bound up with its socio-economic structure, and who supported the institutions that moulded him and reproduced him. The unique characteristics of a truly democratic society as compared to other societies stems from the capacity of the individual in it to question her/his own institutions and to participate to the creative force that brings the latter to life. This aspect, far from characterising solely the Greek democratic *germ*, is for Castoriadis essentially what a true democracy should be (and not only how it was born).

But how should the autonomous, democratic society be, and how could it emerge? In answering this question, Castoriadis interweaved different points of view. Referring to power, true democracy is characterised as the regime of politics, an activity whose end is to change society as a whole. Politics aims to change what is shareable in the social realm, so as to establish explicitly (and *reflexively* through deliberation) a new society/institution. For him, politics is to be understood in the strong and explicit sense of problematisation of society's self-institution that was inaugurated by the Athenian form of direct democracy. Politics is quite different from 'the political', which is understood as the social power which institutionalises sanctioned norms. If the political is everything that concerns explicit power, politics is a movement of the whole society which democratises power and makes each form of power collective, one in which everyone can participate in it. Three human spheres can be distinguished in society: the private *oikos*, the public/private *agorà*, and the public *ecclesia*. Castoriadis maintains that true democracy through genuine political

12. Each institution has some explicit or implicit norms to be respected. Following the law we change our behaviour, and we internalise values. With the democratic praxis we interiorise the postulate of political equality, see for example *La démocratie comme procédure et comme régime*, in Castoriadis, 1996.

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praxis could establish for the first time in history a real public sphere.¹³ At the same time, from the point of view of social organisation, democracy should be the correct articulation of the three human spheres all together. The democracy to come should therefore be the expression of the collective elaboration of the Greek *germ* and of the universalisation principle inherited from modernity:

My conclusion is that we should go beyond the Greeks and the moderns. Our problem is to establish a true democracy in the contemporaneous conditions, to make of this universalization that stays formal or better, incomplete, a substantial and substantive universality in the modern world. (...).

I say that humanity can do better, that it is capable of living in another state, the state of self-government. Its forms, under the conditions of the modern era, are of course to be found, or better: to be created. But the history of Western humanity, from Athens to the democratic and revolutionary modern movements, shows that such a creation is conceivable.¹⁴

This perspective brings Castoriadis to fuse democratic society and revolution. 'The rebirth of the project of autonomy requires tremendous changes, a real earthquake, not in terms of physical violence but in terms of people's beliefs and behaviour. It involves a radical change in the representation of the world and of the place of human beings within the world. The representation of the world as the object of increasing mastery or as the backdrop for an anthroposphere must be destroyed' (Castoriadis, 1999: 179).¹⁵

It is in this context of revolutionary alternatives that Castoriadis refers to the ecological movement, and to the principles of frugality and self-limitation, central principles of the degrowth proposal today, as essential coordinates for thinking about the future of the project of autonomy.¹⁶

Ecology is subversive in that it calls into question the capitalist imaginary that prevails everywhere. It rejects the central *leitmotif* according to which we are fated to constantly increase production and consumption. It shows the catastrophic impact of the capitalist logic on the natural environment and on people's lives. [...]

Ecology is primarily political; it isn't 'scientific'. Science as such is unable to set its own limits or its ends. If we ask it for the most efficient or the most economical means of exterminating the global population, it can (and actually must!) furnish a scientific answer.

13. Ibid.: 152–153. (See also Castoriadis, 1996: 159–182 and 221–241).

14. Castoriadis, 1996: 174 and Castoriadis, 1990: 167. With regard to the collective creation as revolution to come, see Castoriadis, 1996: 124.

15. On the overlapping of revolution and democracy, see for ex. Castoriadis, 1990: 163 and 167. On the idea of revolution as a rapid change of the significations and central institutions, see Castoriadis, 1999: 133–134 and 139.

16. See particularly Castoriadis and Cohn-Bendit (1981); *L'écologie contre les marchands and La force révolutionnaire de l'écologie*, in Castoriadis, 2005.

[...] ecology isn't 'love of nature': it's the need for self-limitation (which is true freedom) of human beings with respect to the planet on which they happen to exist by chance, and which they are now destroying.¹⁷

4. A CASTORIADIAN CRITIQUE OF LATOUCHE AND FOTOPOULOS

Both Latouche and Fotopoulos base their analyses and proposals on Castoriadis' theory, but each takes a partial view of it. Fotopoulos relegates autonomy to its power dimension and treats the social imaginary as an ideological factor. Latouche does not embrace the comprehensive radical meaning of autonomy, thus lingering on its wide-ranging implications for politics and institutions. The end result is that Fotopoulos' perspective on democracy has deficits, while Latouche's is a contradictory one. We articulate the critique along three lines – the social imaginary, pseudoconcrete utopia and *doxa*, and autonomy and politics – and along the way revisit the questions of revolution and universalism.

Social imaginary

Fotopoulos reduces the interpretation of the social imaginary and disregards its intrinsic relation with institutions. The imaginary in Fotopoulos is a mere ideological factor, what he calls the subjective factor of the growth economy, the 'growth ideology'. For Castoriadis instead, the imaginary is the organisational centre of the entire society. The intimate source of a revolutionary movement is the collective creation of new social imaginary significations, embodied in new institutions, a point missed by Fotopoulos. The result is a harnessed and truncated democratic conception, relegated to an ensemble of specific institutions of direct democracy.

Latouche on the other hand accepts that the imaginary is the core engine of society's structure and constitution, and criticises the social and cultural sides of its current manifestation ('growth', 'development'). But he too misconceives the unique relation between the imaginary and the institutions, i.e. that the latter are the material embodiment of the former. The imaginary is treated almost as a pure abstraction in Latouche who misses the point that alternative degrowth significations should be established with alternative institutions, thus positing a revolutionary change by compromises with forms of liberal/representative democracy.

17. Castoriadis, 2005: 237, 244, 248.

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Pseudoconcrete utopia and doxa

Fotopoulos mobilises Castoriadian terms (autonomy, growth ideology) to advance his ID society solution, but what he proposes is in Castoriadis' terms a 'pseudoconcrete utopia'. For Castoriadis, it is impossible to describe a pseudoconcrete utopia; not only what we know changes daily, but importantly, history is creation that cannot be foretold. Neither a programmatic-political proposal from a single citizen nor the construction of a societal utopian transformation from a philosophy of politics can represent an effective generalisable solution for a revolutionary movement. For Castoriadis only people can create and find solutions and these solutions are not foreseeable in advance (Castoriadis, 1979: 333). 'What political thought can do is to pose in clear terms the dilemma that confronts us today. It obviously cannot resolve that dilemma by itself. The dilemma can be resolved only by human collectivity' (Castoriadis, 1996: 148).

Latouche too depicts a pseudoconcrete utopia, although more open than Fotopoulos', with his proposed vicious circle of convivial utopia and the quasi-electoral program of transition.

Indeed Castoriadis never claimed that proposals should not be formulated: discussion and confrontation of different proposals is an essential component of the movement towards autonomy (Castoriadis, 1997: 413). But then, the nature and status of these proposals should be acknowledged for what they are, *doxai*, opinions equivalently valuable as anyone else's. They should not be considered as a universal political goal, as in Fotopoulos, or as a 'pedagogic scheme' (Latouche, 2011: 104), a 'bible' (of degrowth) (Latouche, 2008: 8) or as the pre-conditions for the true (degrowth) path (ibid: 183).

This fallacy of univocity helps explain also Latouche's 'paradoxical politics of degrowth' (Latouche, 2009: 172), according to which on the one hand 'we need to institute society again' because 'the system is not reformable' (Latouche, 2009: 168 and 171), but on the other, since 'politics has to compromise with evil', then this revolutionary potential is compatible with political reformism. Based on this contradiction, Latouche maintains that an ecological democracy cannot be founded on direct democracy. This is a most un-Castoriadian stance, i.e. excluding *a priori* the possibility of direct democracy on the base of some (disputable) observations about the possibility of its generalisation. Sustaining this position not only implies negating the self-creation characteristics of society, but also assumes that there is an order of human affairs linked to the order of the world – a unitary ontology – something which, according to Castoriadis (1997: 274), is a form a heteronomy that has plagued political philosophy from Plato through modern Liberalism and Marxism: 'If a full and certain knowledge (*episteme*) of the human domain were possible, politics would immediately come to an end, and democracy would be both impossible and absurd: democracy implies that all citizens have the possibility of attaining a correct *doxa* and that nobody possesses an *episteme* of things political' (ibid.).

Autonomy and politics

Fotopoulos largely omits the questioning dimension of democracy in the majority of his work, focusing solely on direct self-government. As a result he does not posit the project of autonomy as the fruit of collective reflection and creation, and falls into the fallacy of determinist rationalism (Fotopoulos, 2005: 4-5 and 8-9 and chapter 9 and 12), which leads him to assert that his ID proposal is a pre-given conscious choice between two social possibilities in front of the crisis (p. 4). This determinist rationalism – defined by Castoriadis (1996: 131–135) as an ‘aberration’ – prevents Fotopoulos from conceiving genuinely revolution as a collective creation.

Moreover, Fotopoulos reduces emancipation to its power dimension, accordingly distorting the original meaning of democracy. However his concept of power is unclear and is interchangeably used with ‘domination’ seemingly meaning unequal concentration of power (Fotopoulos, 2005a: 1–2 and chapter 13). According to Castoriadis, domination is the result of the naturalisation of the instituted and of the corresponding aproblematic assumption of the interiorisation of social norms. Because of the reduction of the meanings of domination and emancipation, Fotopoulos’ proposal is restricted to the economic-political domain and gives less emphasis to the wider problem of autonomy, not least the individual dimension of autonomy as a non-dominion relation with one’s own unconscious and the peculiar role of radical imagination – the individual component of the radical imaginary.

Latouche understands better this dimension of autonomy but falls into contradictions and does not bring it to its full conclusion. For Castoriadis autonomy, when referred to a collectivity, is not just limited to making one’s laws, as Latouche refers, but equally importantly implies the capacity to question laws continuously. It is an endless self-institution, which does not aim at a perfect society, but at the highest freedom and justice possible. Hence there is an intimate link with the concept of politics, which is a product of autonomy: politics is the explicit questioning activity regarding the desirable and best institutions, the discovery of the arbitrary nature of the *nomos* that opens up an unending discussion on justice. Politics in the modern era has unfolded in revolutionary moments and is associated with direct democracy.

Note that even in a heteronomous society, in the last instance the law/institution is a creation of society. However in this case creation is imputed to an extra-social actor: God, History, Nature,¹⁸ Reason. This occultation of our creative role secures the intangibility and perpetuity of institutions. Still,

18. This position shows some parallelism with Latour’s political philosophy of nature (Latour, 2004). To the question ‘what is to be done with political ecology’ Latour answers that it suffices to bring the sciences into democracy. For Latour, Science has constituted a transcendent institution setting a limit to public life, and the ‘new constitution’ he envisions entails that the deliberations of the collective must no longer be suspended or short-circuited by some definitive knowledge.

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Castoriadis argues, a possibility for the rupture of the closure of meaning and signification exists since forms of direct democracy have been institutionalised in history – in Ancient Greece and in Western Europe – and there are in principle no impediments to the realisation of a true democratic society – as autonomy is a germ – the only determining conditions being the social-historical. For Castoriadis, on the political level autonomy cannot be set aside from self-government. This precludes the possibility of the compromise Latouche makes: ‘representation is a principle alien to democracy’ (Castoriadis, 1997a: 276). While Castoriadis accepts that there can be elections for (recallable) magistrates for functions that require a particular competency, he is adamant that ‘there cannot be ‘experts’ on political affairs (ibid.: 277).

For Latouche (2011) the path to degrowth is positioned both as an ethics and as a route to happiness. However, happiness from a Castoriadian perspective is a strictly private affair, while the common good is necessarily related to the public domain: the end of politics is not happiness, but individual and collective autonomy. Philosophy cannot determine a substantive common good: the latter is a result of a social and collective action, i.e. principally politics. This is not a relativist position, as there is one important component of substantive, non-relative and democratic common good, which is the conception of autonomy as both an end and a guide. Politics is then the regime that tries to realise contemporaneously individual and collective autonomy and the common good as conceived by the collectivity. Ethics, like happiness, is exclusively part of individual activity, but at the same time cannot be conceived without politics, as politics overhangs ethics, although it does not suppress it, nor subsume it. For Castoriadis, in the last twenty years there has been a discursive return to ethics: in the worst cases ethics is a slogan, in the best cases it is a sign of the general malaise of Western societies, a crisis of values and of social imaginary significations, that leads to contemporary attempts to reject global visions of politics and to find in ethics criteria able to guide action and individual behaviour (Castoriadis, 1996: 249–266).

This has important implications for the debate on whether degrowth is a revolutionary and a universal project. Latouche refers many times to a cultural and social revolution, but given that he does not intend politics as an expression of social autonomy but as an expression of an ethics of responsibility, he divests it of the revolutionary potential and associates it instead with a ‘common good’ of degrowth. He thereby ends up in the ambiguous if not contradictory position of a revolution being brought about by the slow movement of the decolonisation of the growth imaginary, radical yet unfolded through reforms within a system inimical to such changes.

Concerning universalism, the project of autonomy is for Castoriadis universalisable in the forms, times and creative modalities of each society. Latouche’s (1995) ‘pluriversalism’ grasps solely the relativist component of Castoriadis’ proposal about different forms and times, but neglects the emerging but still

immature aspiration for universalism born with modern times. Castoriadis' proposal is not universal in the sense of Fotopoulos' proposal; it is the germ that is universal, not the final crop.

Importantly, if democracy is a 'fragile regime'¹⁹ – or better, tragic – it is not because the line between the two forms of submission – the servile and non servile one – is narrow, as Latouche argues, but because it is a regime which has to posit its laws without any external or supporting norms. Latouche's calling attention to the abuses of direct democracy by demagogues and social elites misses the point that democracy is in itself a regime of self-limitation, and therefore 'the regime of historical risk – another way of saying that it is the regime of freedom – and a tragic regime: (...) Hubris exists where self-limitation is the only norm, where limits are transgressed which were nowhere defined. (...) There is no way of eliminating the risks of collective hubris. Nobody can protect humanity from folly or suicide' (Castoriadis, 1997a: 282).

Latouche is right about the myth of a society purely transparent to itself, but wrong to criticise direct democracy and Castoriadis on this, since it was Castoriadis himself that pointed to this fallacy in 1964–5 (Castoriadis, 1979: 328–329) and named it a 'Marxist myth'. A society totally transparent to itself, that would discover, formulate and realise its collective will without having to pass through institutions, is a 'reverie'. First, the individuals that make it up can never be transparent to themselves, because of the very existence of the unconscious. Second, the social is an indefinite dimension, and there will always be a distance between society as instituting and what is, at every moment, instituted: this distance is one of the expressions of the creative nature of human beings (Castoriadis, 1975).

In conclusion, our revisiting of the Fotopoulos-Latouche debate from the theoretical perspective of their referent, Castoriadis, helps us understand better the meanings – and proposals – of autonomy and direct democracy and reach a better judgement on whether degrowth can be a political, universal and revolutionary project, and what this precisely means. In the final section, we synthesise the implications of Castoriadis' thought and (re)think degrowth and democracy.

5. CONCLUSIONS

What do we learn from Castoriadis' work that is relevant to current debates about degrowth and democracy? First, for Castoriadis democracy is direct democracy. Remaining loyal to his perspective then we have to think of the degrowth transition as part and parcel of the realisation of direct democracy and the autonomous society. For Castoriadis, there is no compromise to be searched for between representative and direct democracy, nor is direct

19. See for example, Castoriadis, 2010b: 65 and Castoriadis, 1997a: 342.

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democracy reducible to a mere procedural mechanism for making decisions, (e.g. Bayon et al., 2010). It refers to a broader social regime that institutes collective forms of decision-making, produces the subjects that internalise its values, and hence realises the ideal of a free, autonomous society, i.e. a collectivity that consciously and reflexively decides and changes its institutions.

Second, from a Castoriadian perspective there is no revolution vs. reform dilemma: the path to the autonomous society (and to degrowth, if we assume that the two projects are interwoven) is necessarily revolutionary, but in his own terms of what revolution is. Revolution means fast and dramatic change to replace some central societal institutions and significations. A strategy of pragmatic reformism within representative democracy combined with selective ‘exits’ and creations of new autonomous spaces outside the core of capitalist economies/societies, is not satisfactory, even if only as a transition strategy.

Third, from a Castoriadian perspective the end point of this revolution is not predefined. This differs from ‘universalising’ proposals that carve out well-defined, ideal (almost Platonic) eco-communitarian or libertarian societies that should be the ultimate result of a democratic degrowth transition. Castoriadis reminds us that we cannot and should not define what will be the outcome of collective creation, as praxis entails the individuals as the ultimate agents of the development of their autonomy. Of course, as individuals we can and should have opinions of what and how should change, and deposit them to the public debate; but this is very different from arguing at the conceptual level for ‘pseudo-concrete utopias’. A Castoriadian perspective urges us not to close *a priori* possibilities and hence to remain alert to possible openings and opportunities for a true revolutionary movement, and not to reject them in advance.

Fourth, if we are to think degrowth through the Castoriadian concept of autonomy, we should then consider it as a universal project, as for Castoriadis autonomy – with its correlative expression of direct democracy – is a universal reality, but in a different way than universalism is commonly understood. There is no political economic blueprint here to be universalised and implemented everywhere. There is the common germ, the general principle of autonomy and the ideal of direct democracy, that are to be cultivated and flourish differently in different places and times. This is an open-ended proposal on the one hand, but on the other restrictive on the principle of direct democracy.

Finally, one might note a possible tension between the essential open-endedness of the Castoriadian proposal and the ecological imperative at the heart of the degrowth proposal. To put it crudely: how can we be sure that a true, Castoriadian democracy will choose a frugal, degrowth mode? Although democracy is subject to *hubris* because self-limitation is its only norm, and although we cannot sketch the contours of an ideal democratic society because societies are open to the creativity of the social-historical, nonetheless the Castoriadian democracy cannot have whatever content. The true open-ended nature of the process is regarding society, and not democracy: Castoriadis’

conception of democracy is substantive and not procedural, and cannot be disentangled from autonomy. The dominant values of the contemporary instituted society – such as the unlimited expansion of a pseudorational pseudomastery – are incompatible with those required by the institution of an autonomous society (Castoriadis, 1979: 418). In fact, ‘an autonomous society does not imply only self-management, self-government, self-institution. It implies *another culture*, in the most profound sense of this term. It implies another way of life, other needs, other orientation for human life’ (Castoriadis, 1997: 250). In this very sense the degrowth proposal is subversive, because like (political) ecology before it ‘it calls into question the capitalist imaginary that prevails everywhere’ (Castoriadis, 2010a: 194). One might argue that the degrowth movement is a rebirth of the original ecological movement, ‘one of the movements that tend toward the autonomy of society’ (Castoriadis, 1997a: 247). Therefore even if we cannot posit that a true democracy will espouse degrowth, we are nevertheless able to find inspiring connections between a substantive conception of democracy and the call for the demolition of the capitalist hubris that is destroying the planet and society or the rejection of the ‘unlimited mindless expansion of production’ (Castoriadis, 2010a: 195), that poses the question of needs and opens up the creation of another culture:

(An autonomous society) presupposes that the passion for democracy and for freedom, for public affairs, will take the place of distraction, cynicism, conformism, and the consumer race. In short it presupposes among other things that the economic cease to be the dominant or exclusive value. Let us put it more clearly still: the price to pay for liberty is the destruction of the economic as central (and in fact, unique) value (...) If things continue on their present course, this price will have to be paid anyway (...) If the rest of humanity is to escape from its unbearable poverty, and if humanity in its entirety wants to survive on this planet in a *steady and sustainable state*, it will have to accept a good *pater familias* management of the planet’s resources, a *radical check on technology and production, a frugal life*.’ (Castoriadis, 1997: 416–417, our emphasis).

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