Rethinking space and time with the Degrowth movement: a (concrete) utopia for the transformation of the Social Imaginary. DRAFT

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1. Introduction and Abstract
Economic growth (embodies in the symbol of modern cities) has played a crucial role for the stabilization of modern, industrialized societies. Now, from a means to guarantee prosperity it has turned into a goal of its own. Far from going ‘green’ at all, growth at any cost increases the pressure on the environment, increases dramatically social inequalities, and erodes the basis of democracy. The traditional answers of ‘green’ NGOs oriented towards nature conservation and often embracing alliances with green growth models, do not seem to be able to adequately address the problem and end up reinforcing inequality and discrimination. Instead, a radical social-ecological transformation is needed in which growth-addiction loses its grip and real democracy, autonomy, and solidarity are strengthened within the collectively negotiated biophysical conditions for our life on Earth. New social movements, social experiments, and innovative practices all over the world embody radical alternatives to the dominant Social Imaginary colonized by growth. In particular, cities are becoming key fields of action where new modes of relation, production, and solidarity are being experimented.

The degrowth movement that originated in Europe at the end of the 90s under the headline of 'degrowth for ecological sustainability and social equity' has been increasingly influential as a platform for fruitful alliances between different social and environmental movements worldwide. As I claim in the paper, it can play the role of a 'concrete utopia' that radically challenges the social imaginary of modern growth-societies while drawing on some of its increasingly unhonored promises, such as securing well-being, social justice, and democracy.

Following Bloch and more recent works in utopian studies, we can say that concrete utopias envision and anticipate the real-possible, which is already slumbering in the meanders of the actual world, and enhance it with a militant optimism. Accordingly, concrete utopias have both a prefigurative and a performative power: they envision alternative imaginaries, by opening spaces for subversive, collective practices that are already hidden in the contradiction of the present. In the paper I will present how in the degrowth movement space, time, and relations are re-imagined and re-enacted in a radical, alternative way. Social experiments create spaces in which alternative ways of conceiving needs, desires, and their satisfaction, are not only envisioned, but also experienced. By provisionally suspending the pervasive impact of dominant societal imaginaries, social experiments can crack open the established understanding of what is
considered to be real and give room to alternative imaginaries, practices, and experiments of common living.

2. Cracks in the Growth Story: The End of the Promise of Prosperity
Economic growth has played for a long time a crucial role in stabilizing modern industrialized societies, by guaranteeing employment, social mobility, tax revenue, and thus social pacification. For the developed nations, growth was always coupled with the promise of prosperity for present and future generations. As long as the pie as a whole continued to grow, governments could by and large avoid social conflicts and unpopular measures to redistribute wealth. Moreover, growth has secured the so-called outputs-legitimation of the social democracies of modern, Western societies.

We have now reached a point at which the magic of growth is losing more and more of its power. The – in countries of the Global North – still common believe that the future will be better and our children will have a better life is being significantly shaken in the last decades. Similarly, the myth that one’s performance and service will be the basis for climbing the social ladder gradually fizzled during the financial crisis. Instead, more and more people now recognize that the increasing pressure to perform only leads to ever-increasing stress and even harsher competition. In the race against everyone else, it’s been a long time since people believed that they could really get further ahead (or better, climb higher); the goal of the race now is simply to maintain the status quo. Similarly, it’s been a long time since continuing growth guaranteed full employment — at least not the kind of full employment that makes possible a dignified life. As a result, the younger generation finds itself living among the debris of broken promises, in an epoch of gradual collapse. For a long time they have been feeling a vague sense of discomfort, recognizing that something is really broken in the logic of growth. If growth was once a means to guarantee wealth and a good quality of life, now it has turned into a goal of its own, to which even the quality of life has to be sacrificed. More and more people are now heading out on the search for alternative practices, ones that no longer force them to live under the constraints of the present system.

3. The Growth-Machine is Like a Crazy Bicycle
The recent economic crisis is only the peak of a process that has its roots in the core structure of modern societies. The growth model itself, on which modern, capitalistic societies are based, has hit its limits. The idea of limits to growth is not new - already in the early 1970s the Club of Rome sent its alarming message that we would soon reach limits to growth due to the crisis of natural resources (Meadows et al. 1972). Technological development and aggressive
globalization bought us the illusion that the prophecy of the Club of Rome would not come true. We know better now.

Modern, capitalistic societies are characterized by what sociologists call dynamic stabilization: they achieve social stability in a dynamic way by means of a steady process of expansion and intensification with regard to space, time, energy and creative activity. Expansion indicates the continuous occupation of new territories in a strict sense, as it has been the case with territorial expansion of colonial powers at the dawn of industrialization, but also in a wider sense in terms of access to relatively cheap natural resources and to new markets. Expansion refers also to the ongoing appropriation of time by means of intensification and of externalization to the future: the shift from renewable to fossil sources of low entropy enabled a relative independence from the time needed for the regeneration of renewable sources.

The intensification of exploitation in time does not only affect natural resources. It can also be framed in terms of a steady acceleration of social, cultural and technological innovation: what Rosa calls an ‘overall acceleration of the pace of life’ (Rosa 2005), by means of increasing positional competition and the drive to profit accumulation.

The mechanism of dynamic stabilization by means of growth can be compared to a bicycle that has to keep moving forward so that it will not fall over. Indeed, with the logic of continuing growth it’s even worse: this is a crazy bicycle that has to be constantly accelerating in order to keep its balance. As long as this process can carry on, stability is continuously, yet dynamically restored.

Given the existing conditions, which require economies to maintain growth in order to remain stable, to slow down in any way, and especially to stop, would lead to disaster. Societies that are dependent on growth will inevitably fall into recession and thus into crisis, unless their basic institutions are radically changed.

However, we are currently faced with a fundamental crisis of this dynamization logic that turns out to have dysfunctional effects with regard to the socio-economic, political and cultural reproduction of modern, capitalistic societies (Rosa et al. 2010). On the one hand, external limits to growth, such as ecological constrains in terms of resource scarcity and sinks absorption increasingly reduce the margin of profitability of capitalist investments (Mahnkopf 2013) and spell therefore the approaching end of ‘easy’ economic growth. On the other hand, the immanent dynamics of stabilization have reached a point at which they undermine their own very conditions of reproductivity. Industrialized countries seem to have reached a threshold at which the feasible growth rates no longer secure employment, social mobility, and welfare.

4. Limits to Growth or Thresholds of Justice?
The ‘limits to growth’ debate, which in the early 70s was framed mainly in terms of external, ecological limits and resource scarcity, is reaching a new, momentous turning point. We are now facing a double economic-ecological crisis, in which measures to enhance economic growth inevitably increase the pressure on the ecological systems and in the long run compromise not only economic development, but also erode the basis of democracy. While promising a return to the golden age of growth, austerity politics instead foster recession, leading to a massive redistribution from bottom to top, and requiring dramatic cutbacks on basic liberties.

Moreover, the promise of growth as a condition for the improvement of quality of life for an increasing number of people has lost credibility, not only from a structural point of view, but also in the perspective of social actors. An increasing number of people in Western countries are becoming aware that the promise of growth for a better life no longer holds. As several scholars has repeatedly shown in subsequent studies, after a certain threshold economic growth decouples from both subjective well-being (Easterlin et al. 2010), as well as quality of life calculated on the ground of further indicators such as ISEW (Max-Neef 1995). Due to positional competition, the steady struggle for an improvement on one’s own life is doomed to fail repeatedly. According to Binswanger we are all somehow ‘trapped’ within so-called treadmills, which while promising happiness foster constant dissatisfaction; for example, due to a phenomenon similar to the rebound effect, innovative time-saving devices lead to an intensification of the workload that require even more time than before, rather than saving time for other ‘free’ activities. Similarly, due to the status or the hedonic treadmills, constant comparisons with others have a negative impact on subjectively perceived happiness (Binswanger 2006).

In the meantime, capitalism is adapting to the crisis of economic growth with even more dramatic consequences on people's lives. It is not so much that we are running against limits that will suddenly and dramatically stop the capitalistic mode of accumulation. In fact, the limits we have been considering are not so much absolute limits that would make any further growth impossible. Rather, it’s more accurate to say that they are like thresholds: when they are reached, the yields on capital investments begin to sink. Limits of this kind merely describe the end of 'easy' growth and, as a consequence, the failure of the promise of ever-rising prosperity.

In order to generate further growth in the face of these factors, the “capacity to exploit” (Schneider 2008) has to be increased even further. This requires not only to draw more intensely on natural resources, but also to expand many of the social institutions that make it possible to accumulate capital: money, public infrastructure, but also human creativity and the investment of time.

This means creation of private debt to create and cover new needs, increasing even more investments in big infrastructures to gain access to resources that are out of reach, the continuous
occupation of new territories in a literal and metaphorical sense, the deregulation of international and domestic markets, the creation of new markets with the increasing commodification of ecosystem services, and an increased willingness to take risks (see fracking). This leads to a dramatic exacerbation of environmental and social conflicts worldwide and to an impairment of the quality of life.

Generally, the ones who end up carrying the higher costs that stem from these changes are marginalized peoples, both in our own countries and in the countries of the global South — which leads inevitably to a growing number of conflicts and wars.

Growth has now turned from a preferred means for securing well-being into a goal of its own. As such, it is not only exacerbating the pressure on the environment, but also jeopardizing democratic stability and social cohesion. The ‘limits to growth’ are not so much ontological limits, but normative ones: we are reaching the limits of acceptability in terms of justice of societies based on economic growth for their own stabilization. An increasing number of social actors are getting aware of this perspective.

5. Shrinking as a destiny: happy simplicity after the fall?

Aware of the current crisis that I termed the end of ‘easy growth’ and faced with the approaching fall of the crazy bicycle I mentioned earlier, conservative post-growth analysts, such as the German sociologist Meinhard Miegel, consider this to be an unavoidable destiny that will come onto us sooner or later. The only path left for them is developing coping strategies after the fall of the bicycle. The crisis will inevitably lead to impoverishment, recession, inequality, and more social conflicts. Conservative thinkers envision a post-growth society under Business As Usual conditions, i.e. without a radical change of the basic structures of societies.

They point out that economic shrinking would mean less tax revenues and thus also the shrinking of welfare state and its services, and more poverty. Because of that, services (especially care-related ones) will have to be reallocated to the families & the private sector. In order to be able to cover the basic costs of life, people will become dependent on holding several different jobs, and in general they will become poorer. As part of the solution, Miegel proposes a cultural shift toward non-material values, such as more family relations, cultural recreations, spiritual and community values. Moreover, philanthropic donations would help reducing misery, thus replacing redistribution policies. In his elitist perspective people will rediscover the kind of leisure that brings meaning to life, and they will come to appreciate cultural and spiritual values more deeply (Miegel 2010).

Instead of recognizing the necessity of a redistribution of resources and a transformation of society as a whole, conservative thinkers demand sacrifice and frugality in order to cope with the crisis.
Such a vision sounds very much like a step back to pre-modern, feudal societies characterized by very high inequality and relatively fixed social roles (no social mobility), including the division of labor among the genders and oppressive patriarchal relations.

Without income redistribution & public services, the option of enjoying cultural & non material values, obviously, remains open only to those, who do not have to work all day for making a living & take care of family members in their spare time. For the large majority of the people instead, the promise of well-being without growth does not imply an overall improvement in either their material or their psychological condition. Quite the opposite: they simply won’t have any time left over for leisure activities and the joys of life, but will be crashed by a new, highly unequal and ultimately unjust society.

Such a vision of economic contraction represents nothing more than the well-known neoliberal program of the destruction of the welfare state, presented under the cover of a post-growth economy.

6. **Degrowth: a ‘Mot Obus’ for a Radical Transformation of Society**

One finds a completely different approach in the movement known as décroissance or Degrowth. This movement, characterized by its critique of ongoing growth, has its roots in France and the other countries of southern Europe (Muraca 2013). Instead of expecting societies to simply adapt to economic contraction, the Degrowth movement works toward a radical transformation of the core conditions of society, in order to free social institutions from this fixation on growth. The goal of the Degrowth movement is to bring about a just, democratic, solidarity-based society in the post-growth era, a society that is no longer dependent on growth in order to remain stable and legitimate (Muraca 2014).

Due to its fruitful heterogeneity, the so-called degrowth movement it is difficult to speak of ‘one’ social movement in a strict sense (Petridis et al. 2015). However, some common elements can be identifies: Degrowth is in a strict sense a transition to a quantitatively smaller and qualitatively different economy that implies a gradual and equitable downscaling of production and consumption (Schneider et al. 2010). In a larger sense, it is also “…an attempt to re-politicise the debate on the much needed socio-ecological transformation…”, by becoming a “…confluence point where streams of critical ideas and political action converge” (Demaria et al. 2013: 192-193). As Latouche claims, degrowth is a critique, a proposed transition process, a vision and a political project at the same time (Latouche 2010).

Starting from recognizing that in the countries of the Global North the end of ‘easy’ growth is approaching and that further growth will come at dramatic social, ecological, and economic costs, degrowth claims that it is possible for people to have a better quality of life working less
and having less under the conditions of redistribution, solidarity, and self-management. Degrowth presents itself as a strong critique of the dominant logic of *economism*, i.e. the idea that the economic logic pervades all others spheres of life and reduce them to merely instrumental rationality.

The Degrowth movement does not represent a political program as much as a call to battle, what Paul Ariés called a ‘mot obus’, a missile word, that like an arrow is aimed directly at the heart of modern, capitalistic societies: as such it radically questions not only their economic structures, but also the cultural infrastructure that justifies it. Degrowth has a very strong potential as a new narrative for catalyzing different drivers, actions, initiatives for societal transformation.\(^1\) As such, it can play a crucial role in bridging among different groups, approaches, forms of resistance and fights. For example, it proved to be successful in bridging between more antagonistic and more constructive forms of resistance, such as for example groups committed to post-carbon initiatives such as CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) or Transition Towns and direct action groups involved in climate camps action, such as the recent ‘Break Free’ initiative that took place all over the world (see [breakfree2016.org](http://breakfree2016.org)).

Finally, Degrowth can offer a platform for dialogue and alliance among different groups fighting the capitalistic mode of production and its logic of exploitation and expansion, such as post-development movements, peasants movement, but also feminists reclaiming the core role of care, or even artists struggling against the productivistic ideology.

The idea of degrowth bears thus the chance of fostering a radical transformation of society. When talking about societal transformation we have to consider at least three dimensions, all of them essential and linked to the other two by a relation of interdependence.

First, the *structural and institutional dimension* encompasses economic relations, relations of power and domination, and institutions in a narrow sense of the term. By drawing on Whitehead, I consider institutions and social structures in a wider sense as the coagulation and sedimentation of long-term, repeated patterns of belief, actions, and collective practices that over time became habitualized, established, and even sclerotized (Muraca 2015). They have grown into material structures that are strongly efficacious on present and future possibilities. This is why we tend to take institutions, material, and social structures for granted as something powerful and unchangeable. The very idea that debts have to be paid back is a great example for a sclerotization that reached the level of obviousness for most of us in our societies. It is inscribed

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\(^1\) This is precisely the program that one could observe at the Fourth International Degrowth Conference in Leipzig in September, 2014. See Brand 2014.
in shared values, sanctioning systems, legitimation models, expectations, and education. However, we know about alternative institutions in the history of humanity, in which - for example - canceling all debts was a great institutional moment that played an essential role in the stabilization and reproduction of society. Think of potluck or jubilees as an example of a different pattern that stabilizes social relations, reduces inequality, and enables a radical renewal of the social fabric.

The second dimension encompass both *collective and individual practices* and include the agency of societal actors. Practices on the one hand are rendered possible, sometimes even generated, and supported by institution. On the other, they also create in the long run new institutions, by means of the process that I term coagulation, sedimentation, & repetition. In practices possible alternative modes of living, ideals and creative experiments gain materiality, as they are embodied into something that goes beyond the merely cognitive representation of envisioned alternatives.

The third, most important one for my paper, is the cultural and value-related dimension of societal transformation, the *imaginary dimension of society*. It refers to a deep, collective self-understanding that confers sense to institutions and practices. It justifies what we do in the face of others, legitimates reciprocal expectations, and ultimately keeps a society together. Within the degrowth discourse Serge Latouche's claim for a 'decolonization of the imaginary' is usually intended in terms of a cultural transformation (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010). However, the reference background of such a concept goes back to Castoriadis and does not only refer to cultural values and norms (Castoriadis 1997).

The Social Imaginary is the result of a long-term stratification of meanings, but also of the influence of élites, and of social struggles. According to Castoriadis, every society constitutes itself as more or less coherent whole of institutions, by creating a comprehensive universe of meaning, which is not determined by historical necessity (Castoriadis 2010). In other words, each society is a system for interpreting the world. Far from being simply immersed in a given set of values that are justified by ideology, a society can become aware that it explicitly creates its own imaginary and that its institutions are its own creation. When a society becomes aware of its self-instituting character it turns into what Castoriadis terms an autonomous society (ibidem, 41). Ideology veils this very process of self-instituting by establishing allegedly indisputable facts that support TINA-narratives and offer a legitimation ground to societal institution on the ground of something 'other' to it, such as God or the market or even the hyostatization of individual freedom. This is what Castoriadis calls heteronomy, which is the very opposite of freedom.
In this paper I focus specifically on the second and third dimension of societal transformation and on the role that social experiments in their variety and multitude can play in renegotiating, shifting, and re-instituting the shared imaginary of society towards a social ecological transformation.

7. Degrowth as a Concrete Utopia

Ernst Bloch, the great thinker of utopia, drew an important distinction between abstract & concrete utopias: While abstract utopias are merely wishful thinking, concrete utopias envision the real-possible, what is already slumbering in the meanders of the actual world.

Abstract utopias might very well play a merely compensatory role under oppression. In this case instead of mobilizing people for a transformation of the status quo, they work as a relief from suffering while at the same time sheltering from reality and suffocating any attempt at resistance and subversion.

Concrete utopias, instead, anticipate what Bloch calls the real-possible, i.e. what is possible not only in general terms, but on the ground of existing potentials and hidden tendencies that might unfold and be actualized in the future.

Taking the perspective of concrete utopias requires a change of perspective on what is real and what is possible. Rather than being closed, the real is open not only in the interpretation of possible alternative developments, but also in terms of non-linear paths that might very well lead to unexpected consequences. The efficacity of past & established structures on future possibilities never amounts to a determination, no matter how powerful they might be. Against traditionally marxist perspectives, there is no necessary dialectics in history and no automatic move towards or against progress, as Castoriadis has shown.

Reality is a complex fabric made of several threads that compose a visible pattern. We are used to see the main pattern also because everybody calls attention to it. The myth of TINA feeds on the belief that this is the only possible pattern that can be woven with what we have at disposal. Yet, when we focus on the main pattern, we neglect the threads constituting it. Some of them are less visible and hidden under the surface, and yet they are part of the actual world and await for being discovered, lifted, and waived into new patterns.

Concrete utopias require a sense for historical tendencies already existing in the present and that can unfold in the future. However, this does not happen automatically. What is needed is called by Bloch militant optimism: while optimism is simply naive and blind with regard to the relations of power, militant optimism means identifying the potentials and tendencies for transformation that are hidden in the present time and actively seizing them and rendering them visible. In other words, acting as a kind of catalyst enzyme that makes them stronger.
Dominant ideologies need legitimation – a chance for building a counter-hegemonic block. Alternative tendencies and potentials for change also include the already established values of a society: no ideology or form of domination can maintain itself in power without some kind of widespread legitimation. Manipulation and false consciousness alone would not suffice in the long run. This is why each dominant ideology and established set of values that justifies and legitimate current institutions, practices, and actions, always bear a surplus of meaning that goes beyond the mode in which such values are actually realized, interpreted, and implemented. Each ideology has somehow to address the quest for disalienation and to embody a promise for a better life. This surplus of meaning is the place where a concrete utopia can intervene and crack dominant ideologies open. A concrete utopia rests on already established values that are widely shared and uses them as the leverage point for enhancing the desire for transformation. Alternative imaginaries are embedded in the contradictions of the present following a sort of 'and-yet' logic. There is no need of the development of new values and new meaning, if the different layers that established values carry with them can be highlighted. Concrete Utopias rest on already established values and subversively transforms them by shifting their meaning, reinterpreting them, and embodying them in alternative practices (Muraca 2014).

It is not so much about reversing or rejecting them. It is about a slow and subversive move of reinterpretation. Let us consider for example values as freedom or autonomy as they are framed in the Global North under a neoliberal paradigm: freedom is taken to mean individual ‘option-freedom’ and arbitrariness in shaping one's own personal life style. And yet it bears in itself the potential for the idea of collective autonomy and can be re-signified to mean collective self-determination, by re-claiming the capacity to decide about the conditions of our common living and not only about our life styles. As Illich reminds us: "prisoners in rich countries often have access to more things and services than members of their families, but they have no say in how things are to be made and cannot decide what to do with them. They are degraded to the status of mere consumers." (Illich 1973). Similarly, the plurality of options that consumers are given are actually limited to the choice between different brands; in their consumer-roles they cannot decide about the basic conditions under which products are manufactured and services are provided.

Finally, by grasping and enhancing the contradictions in the legitimation of dominant systems, concrete utopias can address and appeal to different people who share a similar discontent and a desire for a better way of living. Such a discontent might take the explicit form of critique and resistance against structural forms of oppression, discrimination, and deprivation (as it is the case
with antagonistic protest, boycotting, social conflicts). But it may also be a rather vague sense of frustration that bears a subjective concern for disalienation.

Degrowth as 'mot obus' - as missile word - has the power to catalyze different forms of discontent, by offering a narrative for alternatives: where people already feel like being sacrificed for the sake of securing economic growth, which is supposed to eventually enhance the standard of life. But they no longer believe in its promise or feel they even then, they will be excluded or simply get some of the crumbs of the bread falling from the table of the privileged ones. People concerned about the environment and those concerned about social injustice and environmental racism. People fed up with the constant acceleration of the rhythm of life, the increasing pressure for performance and improvement, that turns into a treadmill.

8. Social experiments and new social movements as workshops for liberation

Concrete utopias have both an anticipatory (or prophetic) and a performative power. On the one hand, they envision alternative imaginaries no matter how hidden they are. They anticipate future possibilities and already contribute to create the space in which these possibilities can be experienced, lived and tested. They operate as laboratories where social innovation is literally forged and where people participating in them can find the power and the motivation for resisting, building alliances, and continue the transformation in other areas of life. Moreover, concrete utopias do not only envision alternatives, they also embody alternative practices in the numerous laboratories in which new spaces are created and protected for actual experimentation and for new experiences. We need to know how it feels to live differently – otherwise we cannot figure it out. Social experiments are spaces in which participants can collectively learn about their desires, can provisionally suspend and thus start questioning pseudo-desires and the satisfaction of needs imposed by the existing structures. Social experiments that have the power of embodying a concrete utopia enable a collective learning process about needs, desires, and what it means to live well together.

According to Ruth Levitas, the education of desire is the most important function of (concrete) utopias for a radical transformation of the status quo (Levitas 2010). In order to start a serious debate about needs and desires protected areas are needed where people can experience, test, and critically discuss alternatives.

It is not very much a matter of scaling up local experiments: in fact, most of the time such experiments work very well at a local, small scale and loose their meaning and transformative power if generalized.

Rather, social experiments can become places where people are empowered against TINA-narratives. They can become spaces for resistance, in which people are protected by the
pervasive logic of growth, find support, solidarity, and shelter and can start struggling for a good life as a common, collective project of autonomy.

Think for example of the shape of cities. We live in times in which due to the dogma of efficiency space is organized in terms of a separation between urban and rural areas, between work and life, between production and consumption. Efficient is this model only under the premise of mass production and mass consumption. Otherwise it is the most inefficient model you could think of, in which the exploitation of one part is the condition for the survival of the other one. Cities can become spaces in which food is produced, energy generated, and even resources are obtained, if you think of the recycling potentials of materials in smart phones, computer, and all sorts of domestic appliances. This require new forms and spaces for interaction that enable sharing, reducing the amount of surface used for living & sustaining life (footprint), decentralizing food and energy production and services, while at the same time guaranteeing cooperation and networks for solidarity. We witness many experiments on the side of reducing consumption by sharing. However, the more radical shift we need in order to change our imaginary about cities is a step from collaborative consumption to collaborative production as it is fostered for example by self-managed cooperatives.

The idea behind the Transition Town movement is a radical rethinking of cities, their function, and their meaning. What I think is crucial in the Transition Towns Movement is precisely its attention to plurality, local expertise and potentials, participation, and networking. The 12-steps program is at the same time a frame that offers some structures for starters, and a loose reference point that can be easily adapted to local conditions. It plays a major role in linking the several, single, small steps into a more general vision. The networking enforces synergies and acts against the fatal danger of exclusive localism that might lead to discrimination and racism. Moreover, working together in a Transition Town project opens a real space for new experiences (like that re-learning old methods does not necessarily mean getting back to the past). These new experiences might in the long run change the common and shared imaginary about what it means to live together and gain back the control over the conditions for the common living. It is a space where people realize in their bodies and not only in their minds that alternatives are possible if we change the frame.

But there are even more interesting experiments, some of which are currently being studied in Spain: After the official end of the Indignados/Occupy movement, several neighborhood in Barcelona continued on a small scale the experience of basis democracy and self-management. There, some working groups, commissions, and assemblies continued to be operative, while also
neighborhoods assemblies gained in importance, periodically gathering in spaces of coordination. Several social project, some more antagonistic (i.e. based on the squatting of abandoned spaces especially after the blowing of the Spanish real estate bubble), some less (negotiation with the local authorities for the concession for use of specific degraded or abandoned areas), started appearing like mushrooms all over the city. Viviana Asara, whose Ph.D. I have co-advised, has collected incredible first-hand material during field studies and interviews with some of the protagonists of the different movement. I mainly refer here to her partly published, partly still unpublished work on the collective re-organization of space in Barcelona.

Reappropriating spaces and shaping them according to the actual needs and visions of the people inhabiting the territory is not only an important struggle for indigenous people in rural area, as we know. It is just as well an essential moment of resistance and struggle in the midst of the cities. As Lefebvre remarked, self-management as a collective control of one’s own territory is a very strong form of opposition against formless and spaceless globalization embodied by late/neoliberal capitalism (Lefebvre, 1991). Through self-management everyday life can be liberated when it extends to all sectors of life and not only to those that are perfectly compatible with the systemic structures of late capitalism. It is just the opposite of what we call strangely enough “sharing economy” that is nothing else than the embodiment of the neoliberal dictate of “becoming entrepreneurs of oneself” (Foucault 2008) in all spheres of life without social protection or a solidarity network.

Let us take as an example urban gardening: it can be a recreational activity for enthusiastic LOHAS (the term is used in sociology to indicate Lifestyles Of Health And Sustainability, mainly educated, environmentally concerned upper middle class) or it can become a collectively self-managed project, in which not only the material basis for life is guaranteed, but also political decision making is practiced in what Asara calls ‘everyday politics’. The self-managed gardens organized around the occupied square in Barcelona – more precisely at its very core – were space of re-politicization, of reappropriation of the means for autonomy in an immediate, material, and economic sense: it was a space in which the people could implement a different mode of common living, while exercising basic, consensus-oriented democracy in matters that affected them most directly. Other neighborhood groups in Barcelona occupied or managed spaces in which essential needs were met, going from gardening to libraries, to craft and repairing workshops. For example, in one of the self-managed projects, a carpentry workshop was established, in which not only carpenters can “conduct works for outer clients allowing them to earn their lives (20% of the earnings go to the common fund), but they provide assistance-DIY-workshops three times a week for neighbours willing to build some furniture or other objects, and carry out communitarian work” (Asara 2015). The Recreant Cruïlles started restructuring in
a self-managed way a square in what they called an “alienated neighborhood”, which led to a series of initiatives of pedestrianization of the adjacent streets. Asara worked closely with some of the protagonists of the group who also created a bottom-up system of participatory urban planning. All self organized and self managed.

Another similar project of reappropriation combined different levels of action addressing some of the pressing needs of the neighborhood: “the need to have a gathering space, the necessity of self-employment as part of a broader vision to create a self-managed economic infrastructure, and the intention to have a space from which to generate a strong political position. Five guiding principles were also defined: community, autonomy, equity, solidarity and permaculture.” (Asara 2015). Every single one was contested and discussed in assemblies, committees, and working groups, before being collectively chosen as the basis for the common life. The group La Base defines according to Asara autonomy as “a process of historic signification for the construction of a new self-managed society, based on autonomy and abolition of existing domination forms: the state, capitalism and all those that affect human relations and relationships with nature. It involves a conscious, personal and collective action, for the improvement and recovery of qualities and values that enable us to live in common. At the same time, it involves the construction of new organizational forms and structures in all the domains of life that guarantee equality of decision and equity in covering the vital life needs” (see https://integrarevolucio.net/es/revolucion-integral/que-entendemos-por-revolucion-integral/)

According to Gibson-Graham (2006) place is the “site of becoming, of practices of resubjectivation through alternative economic institutions” (Asara 2015). Social experiments like the ones mentioned embody practices of re-subjectivation by creating alternative economic institutions, which are deeply rooted in the territory as a site of becoming that involves one’s own identity in the first place (Gibson-Graham, 2006) or – as Asara writes – ‘bringing the revolution to oneself” through personal transformation and building of community (Asara 2015). New social movements do not neglect the dimension of the subjects involved in the project of transformation with their embodied feelings, interiorized practices, fears, and constrains.

According to Foucault, neoliberalism takes on the idea of economic growth as a general mode of regulation, which is rooted in the idea of the entrepreneurial structure of human behavior, and makes it into a principle that does not only stabilize society structurally and materially, but becomes the main driver of action from the point of view of the individual social actors. Accordingly, the new homo oeconomicus (as it is framed by neoliberal theory) is no longer – as it was the case with 19th century's classical conception of laisse-faire liberalism – a man of exchange, but an entrepreneur of himself (Foucault 2008, 225ff): he is for himself his own capital that should be invested in order to generate an income – or, in more general terms – a constantly
increasing utility flow. The main driver of economic growth from the point of view of neoliberal theory is Human Capital (Becker 1993): the innovative force of production that drives economy and society is ultimately the self-understanding of individuals as entrepreneurs, always concerned with themselves as an investment project oriented at constant improvement in competition with others. Accordingly, a policy of economic growth will no longer just focus on increasing physical capital and the number of workers (population), but will focus on 'the form of investment in human capital' (Foucault 2008, 232).

Here the logic of growth is explained not so much at the structural or material level of the economy, but as the hegemonic form of subjectiv(iz)ation specific of late, neoliberal capitalism: investing in one's own potentialities in order to improve income and productivity. Entrepreneurs of themselves are the new, coral subjects of modern, neoliberal societies that can (and should) be governed (i.e. disciplined to use another term of the earlier Foucault) for the well-being of all. In other words, growth, competition, and accumulation are not only structural mechanisms for societal stabilization and accumulation. They are also modes of subjectiv(iz)ation: They embody regimes and discourses that form subjects and shape the social imaginary through patterns of recognition, conceptions of needs and modes of desiring. We are not born as subjects, but become subjects through social relations: in order to be 'seen', recognized as legitimate and full member of society we have to be – as Judith Butler writes – 'intelligible' for other members of society. Butler has described the essential role that heterosexual intelligibility plays in our societies so that we become subjects if we occupy specific social positions that can be read according to accepted and established codes. Subjectiv(iz)ation however (the process through which we become subjects, and thus - one could say - fully human, acknowledged members of the communities that matter to us) goes both ways: on the one hand we are 'made into subjects' by accepting and occupying social positions that enable recognition and intelligibility. This might sound like a deterministic perspective in which agency and the real possibility for social transformation is lost. However, on the other hand, we are made into subjects i.e. we do occupy a social position, are full members of society and can act from that very position to challenge the very conditions of subjectiv(iz)ation.

We can learn from the feminist movement what it means to fight against structural discrimination and mental infrastructures that are deeply inscribed in the very struggling subjects involved, The ideology of growth – like patriarchy – works like a default-option in habitualized practices, interactions, expectations, and even hopes for alternatives. Feminist made clear that awareness raising groups were indispensable spaces in which the 'obviousness' of dominant narratives could be addressed, discussed, and challenged not only at the cognitive level of social analysis and critique (as it is instead typical in marxist antagonist groups), but also with respect to emotions, daily experiences, and internalized expectations. Patriarchal structures are not somewhere in
front of us - they are literally embodied, materialized through practices, repeated over and over again as a necessary condition to achieve recognition, i.e. to be seen and acknowledged by others. Creating spaces in which alternative modes of living could not only be envisioned, but felt, was the fundamental condition for the success of feminist struggles against patriarchy. Re-learning to desire, reappropriating different modes of desiring was the core of political claims and emancipatory actions. I am not speaking here of getting back to some authenticity of desire hidden under the weight of patriarchal oppression. Rather, new modes of desire had to be discovered or even invented together in a process of collective learning and of collective liberation.

When applying this experience to the Degrowth movement, it means that education of desire does not mean to discuss about true or false desires from an expert's or activist's point of view. Education of desire in the space opened by concrete utopias has no teachers. It is a collective, open, and creative process of common learning that can take place in the space provisionally and temporally liberated from the oppression, compulsion, and the alleged obviousness of TINA-narratives.

We can find some inspiration in queer politics and practices that embody a paradoxically subversive power of creating new subjectivities by shifting patterns or recognition. Such form of resistance and transformation is not so much an antagonistic opposition, but subversion, the slow shifting of meaning by irony, parody, and unfaithful repetition.

New social experiments can learn from the strategies of ‘undoing gender’: subversive actions, (mis)representations, performances challenge and shift hegemonic – in this case heterosexual – meaning and crack open its monolithic face, thus enabling alternative imaginaries. Can this strategy be applies to capitalism and growth? Undoing growth? Undoing capitalism? I think that many social experiments and experience have tried to explore these new forms of resistance. They have a strong potential for a transformation of the Social Imaginary.

Social experiments can work as concrete utopias if they become spaces in which subversive modes of subjectiv(iz)ation can be experimented and supported. In such spaces alternative ways of conceiving needs, desires, and their satisfaction, are not only envisioned, but also experienced. By provisionally suspending the pervasive impact of dominant societal imaginaries, social experiments can crack open the established understanding of what is considered to be real and give room to alternative imaginaries, practices, and experiments of common living.
Picture from Asara 2016 representing that conception of one of the social projects she studied in Barcelona (Can Batlló), where projects with lighter circumferences represent projects not yet implemented.
Works Cited


