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Growth and Anti-Growth

Miguel Amorós

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Speaking about growth and anti-growth is the same thing as speaking about capitalism and anti-capitalism, since capitalism is the only economic formation that is not only based on the acquisition of profits, but on their increasing accumulation. The fruits of capitalist exploitation are not for the most part squandered in expenditure but are transformed into capital and reinvested. In this way capital increases; it endlessly accumulates. Growth is the necessary precondition of capitalism; without growth the system would collapse. It is the indication of the normal function of society; it is therefore a class goal. Because the bourgeoisie is aware of the basis of its power, expansion is its banner; even so, it was not until 1949 that growth was defined as a general policy of the state, in Truman's famous speech. Capitalism had by then become more technical, more dependent on technology, more American. Ideology based on economic growth as panacea, developmentalism, became the axis of all national policies, of the right as well as the left, in parliamentary as well as dictatorial regimes. The primacy of economic growth with regard to political goals characterized the speeches of the representatives of domination during the fifties and sixties. Freedom was identified with the possibility

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of growing consumption, of access to a greater number of commodities, made possible by growth. And it was guaranteed by the postwar social pacts among governments, parties and trade unions, in order to allow for full employment and the increase of the buying power of the workers linked to productivity increases.

The emptiness of life delivered over to consumption and manipulated by the culture industry was revealed by the youth revolt of the sixties, which affected the major centers of the so-called “developed” countries: the dissatisfied youth did not want a life where not dying of hunger was exchanged for the certainty of dying from boredom. The uprisings of the black ghettos in America added new fuel to the fire of revolt. Those who were excluded from the enjoyment of abundance displayed their rejection by way of the looting and destruction of commodities. This nihilist revolt encountered its theory in May of 1968. But this was not all. The system itself began to be questioned from within by dissident specialists, specifically from the camp of economic theory and environmentalism. Rachel Carson was the first to warn of the danger posed to life on Earth by industrial production. The economists N. Georgescu-Roegen (in his essay, “The Costs of Development”, in 1966), H. Daly and E. J. Misham, contributed a “physical” and holistic perspective to the discipline, considering the world as a closed system, a “Spaceship Earth” where everything is related to everything else and everything has its cost. According to a historical article written by Kenneth Boulding in 1966, in the cowboy economy success was measured by the extent of production and consumption, while in the economy of the “astronaut” success corresponded to the preservation of the environment. However, the growth inherent to the former is nourished by the latter’s degradation, so clearly visible from the point when destruction comes to prevail over the other factors (when the capacity of the planet to support wastes is surpassed). Pollution, chemical additives, acid rain, wastes,

population growth, predatory urbanism, the proliferation of automotive culture, tourism, etc., problems that reveal the biological disequilibrium of the planet, were brought up and debated quite precociously. At that time, Barry Commoner, in *The Closing Circle*, and Edward Goldsmith, in the pages of the journal *The Ecologist*, criticized one-sided technological development, the irreparable squandering of “natural capital” and the increasingly negative impact of modern industry on ecosystems, health and social relations. Scientists like J. Lovelock and L. Margulis formulated the “Gaia Hypothesis” concerning the planet as a self-regulated system, and revealed for the first time the rise of the greenhouse effect due to emissions of gases into the atmosphere by industry and automotive transport. Another expert, Donella Meadows, of MIT, under the aegis of the Club of Rome, wrote a report entitled *The Limits of Growth* for the Stockholm Conference (1972), which broached the irreconcilable contradiction between infinite development and finite natural resources. Economic expansion had disorganized society and forced it to create an increasing number of hierarchies and regulations. It took place to the detriment of the ecosphere and if it were to continue it would end with the depletion of resources. All economic policies had to contend with the environment if we really wanted to know their real costs. Furthermore, the exponential growth of population would end up provoking a food crisis (as Malthus had said) and within one century would lead to a social collapse and the disappearance of human life. The solution was supposed to reside in “zero growth”. Recalling the recommendation of John Stuart Mill, a stationary economy would reestablish the equilibrium between industrial society and nature. Finally, Goldsmith and a group of his colleagues published *A Blueprint for Survival* in 1972 that recapitulated and systematized the previous critiques. Its message: economics and ecology must be reconciled, in order to give way to stable, autarchic and decentralized social forms.

These critiques that emphasized the underestimated role of nature in social history were ignored by almost all the dissidents of the time with the honorable exception of the anarchist Murray Bookchin, because, first of all, they questioned the dogma of development of the productive forces, the sacred foundation of socialism. And secondly, because, far from intending to carry out a revolutionary transformation by attempting to unite a majority of the population behind a radical anti-developmental program, their advocates only sought to convince the governments, the employers and the politicians of the world of the need to confront the facts revealed in their exposés with measures that did not exceed the bounds of taxes, fines and subsidies. The scientists and the other experts were the victims of their own positions as members of a subaltern and auxiliary class of capitalism, who by no means questioned capitalism, which is why they closed their eyes to the consequences for action of their objections to growth and denied their essential anti-capitalist significance. Restricting themselves to playing their role of advisors, they committed the error of trusting their leaders, that is, those responsible for the planetary degradation that they had themselves denounced. The environmental movement would always be encumbered by this original sin and in the eighties its “green” projects would converge with capitalist innovations. The neoliberal flight forward towards growth and degradation—the rising price of oil, Bhopal, Chernobyl, dioxin, the hole in the ozone layer, pollution, etc.—confirmed the accuracy of the critiques and the failure of untrammelled development converted the majority of world leaders to environmentalism. The concept of “sustainable development” of the Brundtland Report (1987), presented by the World Commission on the Environment and Development, and especially by the Rio Conference (1992), marked the fusion of environmentalist ideology and capitalism, which was accepted first of all by the advocates of state regulation of growth, the

In other words, it depends on the transformation of the ecological crisis into a social crisis, and therefore its transformation into a class struggle of a new kind. If the latter reaches a sufficient level, the forces of the oppressed will be able to replace and abolish capitalism. Then humanity will be able to be reconciled with nature and will be able to repair the harm inflicted on freedom, dignity and desire by the attempts made to dominate nature.

backyards, since such things are fine when they take place in Mali, Bolivia or the Lacandon Jungle, but not in the western heartlands.

Cooperative production and profitless exchange cannot be born from reaching a consensus with power but only from the imposition on the part of the oppressed of social conditions that proscribe industrial production and profitable trade. The struggle against oppression—which, as Anders said, takes place between victims and perpetrators—is the only struggle that can establish the foundations for a “local ecological democracy” and social autonomy, in the outskirts of Kinshasa and everywhere else.

The ideology of anti-growth is the latest mutation of the civil society movement in the wake of the miserable failure of the counter-summit movement; a renewable illusion, as Los Amigos de Ludd would say. As the trivialization of protest and the suppression of conflict, it is an auxiliary weapon of domination. In our time, capital has emerged victorious, just as it did from the class struggle of the sixties and seventies. With nobody and nothing to stop it from pursuing its course of endless destruction, this time thanks to the contributions of the environmentalists and the civil society movement. A free society cannot be conceived without its abolition, which, in the eyes of the anti-growth party, would entail social chaos and terrorism, something that we have an abundance of already and that will gradually assume the form of an eco-fascist regime. In view of the scale of the ecological catastrophe, to fight for a free life is no different than to fight for life itself. But the struggle for survival—for networks of regional exchange, for public transport or for clean technologies—means nothing in separation from the anti-capitalist struggle; instead, the power of the struggle for survival is rooted in the intensity of the anti-capitalist struggle. It is a movement of secession but also a movement of subversion, whose impulse depends more on the depth of the social crisis than on that of the ecological crisis.

former “left”. It was an attempt to preserve growth, rather than an attempt to replace growth with sustainability; to manage the noxious effects of development, rather than to abolish them. This is why an attempt was made to harmonize the environment with the market economy. The ozone layer and the consumerist lifestyle could be compatible thanks to a new accountability that would take environmental impacts into consideration. The market would reward “clean” production and punish polluters. Recycling would be rewarded and waste penalized. Nonetheless, the Kyoto Conference on Climate Change (1997) revealed the insoluble problems presented by the environmental reconversion of production and consumption. Despite the rise of an increasingly more important environmental industry and the savings implied by the dismantling of the state’s social services, the market was incapable of assuming responsibility for this transformation because it was so burdensome for industry. Basic measures such as scrubbers for gaseous emissions endangered growth, the central pillar of the contemporary capitalist system. The preferred solution, the globalization of trade, and its primary consequence, the relocation of industries and the exponential growth of transport, led in the opposite direction. This solution demanded that intensive agriculture must continue to feed the world, but now with the aid of genetic engineering, that the chemical industry should determine human metabolism, that the children of Asia should work in factories and that the High Speed Train should lacerate Europe. The same thing could be said about nuclear power or genetic engineering. If destructive growth required an environmentalist disguise, destruction would have to be presented as the environmentalist act par excellence.

In December 1912, six years before she was assassinated by the soldiers of a social democratic government, Rosa Luxemburg published a controversial book, *The Accumulation of Capital*, in which she claimed that the extended reproduction of

capital, that is, “growth”, could only be ensured by incorporating into the orbit of the commodity the backward sectors of the modern countries and the population of the rest of the world that was still ensconced in pre-capitalist or incipient capitalist production relations. The existence of an outside world was vital for the existence of the capitalist world, so that the latter would have a source of consumers, raw materials and cheap labor power. The difficulties that the process might encounter were solved by force: “In the overseas countries, its first act, the historical act with which capital was born and which henceforth never ceased for even one minute to accompany accumulation, is the subjugation and annihilation of the traditional community. With the ruin of these primitive conditions, of the natural, peasant and patriarchal economy, European capitalism opened the door to exchange for commodity production, it transformed its inhabitants into compulsory customers for the capitalist commodities and simultaneously accelerated, in gigantic proportions, the process of accumulation, directly and shamelessly seizing natural wealth and the treasured riches of peoples subjected to its yoke.”

Luxemburg’s book was forgotten, perhaps because it contradicted Marx, but her point of view was resuscitated in the seventies by certain critics, who shared in common their status as former high officials—Ivan Illich, in the Church; Francois Partant, in French Finance; Fritz Schumacher, in English industry—who were involved in “Third World” development programs, as well as the fact that they proposed, unlike the environmentalists, the abandonment of capitalism. In effect, books like *Tools for Conviviality* (Illich), *The End of Development* (Partant), *Small Is Beautiful* (Schumacher) or *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency* (John Seymour), exposed the absence of any relation between economic prosperity and social well being, rejected productivism, the new technologies, bureaucratic and authoritarian systems, mass consumption, monocultures, chemical pesticides and fertiliz-

torial, laws, etc., that is, a “reformist transitional program”, that is to be implemented by the currently existing political institutions. And we do not have to point out that this is the same thing that is proposed by the civil society movement platforms, the environmentalists, the fake anti-globalization activists and even the integrated “left”. Forgive us for saying that the promotion of a marginal economy without any real autonomy or any possibility of being transformed into a real alternative is only an alibi. Peasant agriculture, the reduction of consumption and of mobility, giving priority to human relations, healthy food, local barter networks, non-competition, non-accumulation, etc., are anti-developmental ideas that forfeit all their meaning when the purpose of their effective implementation is not a social disruption that must be provoked when their generalization seriously transforms the conditions of production and exchange by endangering the existence of the market, dominant institutions and privileged social classes. Under the pressure of the need for peaceful relations, all alternative measures are subordinated to capitalism. Thus, certain types of marginal economies are nothing but zones of reserve manpower for self-sustaining industries; renewable energy leads to gigantic wind or solar farms in accordance with the industrial model; recycling and re-use lead us to the major industry of the export of digital waste; the oil crisis inaugurates the era of vast bio-fuel plantations. The interest expressed in the concept of convivial anti-growth by NGOs, trade unions, legislatures or the United Nations as regulatory and “monitoring” bodies, stands in stark contrast to the lack of interest shown by these same institutions for the idea of communal assemblies and more generally for the reconstruction of an autonomous public sphere. They do not want to do away with leaders, which is why they have to carefully preserve the political machinery that makes them necessary, although in order to do so they have to prevent the emergence of any real democratic experience in their own

the inanity of symbolic and festive actions “in order to raise awareness in society”, to official politics, to the consumers associations, to municipal candidates and trade unionism. And the transition to the autonomous economy must be carried out without friction, because disagreements with power endanger “democracy”. The supporters of the anti-growth movement, as an enlightened lumpenbourgeoisie, experience panic at the prospect of “disorder” and much prefer the established order to popular unrest. The ideas have changed, but the methods are those of the civil society movement. We must “exercise the citizenry” and move forward in “democracy”, we are told by the ideologue Serge Latouche. In order to exorcise the specter of the social crisis the anti-growth party attempts to replace the economic apparatus of capitalism while preserving its political apparatus. Since in the final accounting the proclaimed way out of the market is not a real break but a smooth transition, they want to separate from the economy without separating from politics; they accept all the mystifications that they have rejected in their theory. We shall not overlook the fact that for Latouche escaping from growth does not mean the renunciation of markets, money and the wage system, since he does not want to stir up the oppressed but to convince the leaders of society. His discourse is that of the technocratic expert, not that of the agitator. By calling attention to climate change, the bursting of the financial bubbles, increasing unemployment, the indebtedness of the impoverished countries, droughts and other catastrophes, he attempts to inspire the leadership class to renounce growth. It is thought that the leaders, faced with the impossibility of controlling the crisis and threatened by unforeseeable conflicts, would prefer social peace and the “deconstruction” of the commodity society. This explains why this party does not contemplate the possibility of a revolutionary social change that would be carried out by the victims of growth, and that in practice it proposes a set of reforms, taxes, subsidies, mora-

ers, uncontrolled urbanism, etc., and advocated a locally-based economy founded on community bonds, decentralization, traditional technology, diversified crops and natural fertilizers, self-sufficiency, the reduction of the size of the cities... Theoretically, this implied a break with at least two essential aspects of Marxism (and of revolutionary syndicalism): the fully industrialized society as an emancipatory alternative, that is, the unlimited unfolding of the socialized productive forces as the basic precondition for a free society; and the role of the manufacturing-based working class in the project of liberation from capitalist servitude, that is, the function of the industrial proletariat—with its work ethic and its trade union docility—as the agent of history and as the revolutionary subject. Since freedom depends on the stability of the ecosystems within which it exists, it cannot be born from a universal socialized developmentalism but from a return to the self-sufficient community and local production; it arises not from the seizure of the capitalist means of production, but from their dismantling. It is not more consumption and therefore more production that must be assured, but material subsistence. The needs of the communities must be defined in terms of resources, not in terms of buying power. Therefore, we must not organize this society in another way, but transform it from the bottom up, abolish all dependencies, destroy the machinery that renders hierarchy, specialization and the wage system necessary. In convivial society no activity would impose upon anyone who did not participate in it any task, any consumption or any training. Autonomously and horizontally organized society would have to dominate the conditions of its own reproduction without thereby running the risk of changing its own nature. Exchanges would not compromise its existence. A society of that kind would have to be a society where the social fabric would replace the state, controlling its technology and dispensing with the market. Following the thread of this discourse, in order to achieve a

society of this type—we shall add—the workers will have to fight not in order to get a better position or even simply to preserve themselves in the labor market, but to find a way out of the economy. They will have to destroy the factories and the machines, not subject them to self-management. And, since in contemporary capitalism consumption prevails over production, the terrain of the conflict will reside less in the workplaces than in everyday life. This combat will require the will to live in a different way, which is why it cannot be waged by satisfied wage earners and consumers. Those who are destined to wage this struggle will be the precarious workers, the immigrants, the unemployed, the marginalized—the excluded in general—who will act not in the framework of capitalist production, but on its margins, that is, with one foot outside the system, and therefore they will be more likely to unite, by means of self-organization and self-sufficient consumption, in a perspective oriented towards undermining the economy and the state. In the “developed” countries the current degree of exclusion is minimal, although it is increasing, but in the so-called “underdeveloped” countries the excluded are legion.

The destruction of the working class milieu in the eighties is responsible for the fact that this critique is still anchored in the circles from which it originally derived and from which, fifteen years later, it was recuperated by the ideologists of anti-growth. In the camp of radicality, we can at least mention the reflections of the following sort: Bookchin, Freddy Perlman, Theodore Kaczinski, L'Encyclopédie des Nuisances, Fifth Estate.... The least that can be said about these circles is that they were not the most appropriate means for purging this critique of its contradictions and disseminating it. In accordance with this critique, the extended reproduction of capital and labor power was assured by growth, but the reproduction of the environment that provided the resources was not assured by the former, nor was the reproduction of society as a whole. It was then fitting to ask if the conflicts that necessarily resulted

from environmental deterioration, the catastrophes and social decomposition, favored a transformation of the system or, in other words, if they permitted the emergence of a credible alternative. The ideology of anti-growth attempted to be this alternative.

The name itself is a simple label taken from Georgescu-Roegen. At first it consisted of an apparently coherent whole of ideas such as the ones we can find in Illich, Partant, Mumford or *The Ecologist*, elaborated by experts from the agencies for international development and cooperation, universities, NGOs and “social forums”, the same milieu that gave birth to the civil society ideology of “alter-globalization”. There are, however, important differences between these two movements: the anti-growth movement is anti-developmental and clearly condemns eco-capitalism and the role of the new technologies. It disapproves of zero-growth just as much as it disapproves of sustainable development. It therefore advocates a departure from the market system, not a controlled global market; furthermore, it does not trust the state as a system of centralized and hierarchical power that cannot be justified in a society without a market, preferring instead the Gandhian ideal of a federation of self-sufficient villages. In terms of theory, we have a libertarian conception that is similar to that of naturism, or communalism, but in practice it is nothing but citizenism. If we need proof of this we only have to cite the support for this movement displayed by ATTAC, Ecologists in Action or *Le Monde Diplomatique*. The goals may vary, but the goals do not matter, since “convivial anti-growth” aspires to peacefully curtail mass production and consumption “by means of the democratic control of the economy by politics”. Arnau, “from a little corner in Collserola”, specifies that what is required is the formation of “transitional governments, with unyielding ethical standards, monitored from below”. And how is this to be achieved? By means of “convivial” action, which will lead us, by way of