

The relevance of direct democracy, non-reformist reform, and nowtopias for purposive degrowth transformations

The relevance of democracy for degrowth is paramount. Recently, key degrowth scholars have argued that degrowth will be democratic otherwise “it won’t be” (Muraca, 2014). During the influential international degrowth conferences of Barcelona and Leipzig, democracy has been a key and constant theme of participatory processes (working groups and group assembly process respectively), which aimed at advancing policy, action and a research agenda for degrowth. On the whole, degrowth advocates seem to support some sort of a direct democracy version of democracy with respect to how to achieve and collectively govern degrowth transformations (e.g. Cattaneo et al., 2012). However, direct democracy, i.e. a system “based on the direct, unmediated and continuous participation of citizens in the tasks of government” (Heywood, 2002, p. 70) is regularly challenged as a romantic and not applicable ideal, as an impossible utopia. Although critics concede that direct, popular self-government might possibly be applicable at the local level, they argue that it is not feasible to implement for decision-making at broader scales where the amount of people that would need to be directly involved would be impossible to manage. In other words, direct democracy beyond small-scale experiments would be slow and cumbersome if genuine deliberation, as well as inclusive and equal participation is to be achieved (Fishkin, 2011).

Nevertheless, examples of or attempts at direct self-rule exist both currently and in the historical record. Beyond the oft-quoted example of ancient Athenian democracy (e.g. Castoriadis, 1984), Germanic assemblies or ‘things’, such as for example the medieval Icelandic Alþingi, provide a historical example of regular, assembly-based decision-making applied for relatively large territories and in the absence of central authority or enforcement (Karlsson, 2000), largely pursued in the course of evading the centralisation of authority (in Norway). Similarly, the ongoing Indian radical ecological democracy (Kothari, 2014) experiment is a contemporary example of popular self-rule based on constant engagement that combines direct with delegative democracy in order to overcome time and cumbersomeness shortcomings – similar observations could perhaps also be made for the recent Kurdish experiment in the autonomous region of Rojava (Graeber, 2014). Those examples suggest that direct democracy can be constituted as a “nowtopia” within (or in the precincts of) contemporary systemic conditions, rather than being an unfeasible dream. But perhaps less conspicuously, the fact that such examples have not emerged out of revolutionary breaches with contemporary systemic conditions, also suggests that such nowtopias may come about via ostensibly less radical action, such as via non-reformist reforms. We further explain the two terms of nowtopia and non-reformist reform, which are key for the discussion and further elaboration of links between democracy and degrowth.

The term nowtopia refers to practices or the building of alternatives that aim at bringing about desired futures – such as degrowth. Examples of nowtopias include cohousing projects, producer-consumer cooperatives, social education and healthcare, permaculture and urban gardening initiatives, ecovillages, open source technologies, etc. Nowtopias are seen to embody an alternative model of societal organisation in

practice and to have the capacity to promote the creation of a collective political subject; as such, they are implemented in practice by degrowth activists (e.g. www.degrowth.org/can-decreix) and celebrated in writing by degrowth scholars (Carlsson & Manning, 2010). Nowtopias are essentially concrete utopias, i.e. alternative society or institution-building initiatives that simultaneously anticipate and effect desired-for futures (Levitas, 1990). Yet, nowtopias risk ending-up becoming mere “exit strategies”, a term that resonates Marx and Engels’ criticism of “utopian socialist” initiatives of the mid-19th century, which they criticized for renouncing the use of resources available in the world they seek to revolutionise and rather seek ‘to achieve its salvation behind society’s back, in private fashion, within its limited conditions of existence, and hence necessarily suffer[s] shipwreck’ (Marx, 1963, cit. in Levitas, 2011, p. 61).

One way to overcome this criticism is by seeking to establish via or link nowtopias to non-reformist reform, a type of reform of current institutions that creates conditions for societal transformation. According to Andre Gorz who has coined the term, this includes reforms which are incompatible with the preservation of the system and which ‘are not conceived in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands. [...] A non-reformist reform implies a modification of the relations of power and implies structural reforms’ (Gorz cited in Muraca, 2013). Non-reformist reforms involve reforms of current institutions that reinforce conditions for societal transformation by destabilising hierarchical structures and opening up spaces for new radical structures to emerge and popularise. But although degrowth scholars advocate this sort of action for pursuing social transformation (Muraca, 2013) they have yet to systematically reflect (e.g. with specific examples) on the pros and cons of this strategy for social transformation as well as on what exactly this may involve in terms of ways in which degrowth transformations may be pursued. Furthermore, scholarship has yet to consider the sort of non-reformist reforms that could facilitate a transition to a direct democracy system of degrowth governance.

Another way to deal with Marx and Engels’ criticism is by critically considering its relevance for degrowth transformations. More recent scholars have, for example, argued that the level of resources available “at the back of society” initiatives in the 21st century is much higher than those available to such initiatives at the time when Marx and Engels were writing the Communist Manifesto, i.e. mid-19th century (North, 2007). Moreover, evidence from historical work studying past transformations suggests that influential and key institutions of the modern world were devised and developed at the margins of what used to be centre of cultural and political activity in the past, such as the reinvention of money at the Frisian edges of the Roman Empire at the time of the latter’s domination of western world culture and politics (Pye, 2014). This approach requires us to put an emphasis on understanding those processes, conditions and institutional means by which transformational initiatives developed “at the margin” end up becoming relevant for transforming dominant systems and their imaginaries.

The aim of this contribution is to clarify and make more explicit the links between nowtopias, direct democracy and non-reformist reform and then consider their relevance for the study of degrowth transitions. We will do so, by first presenting specific cases (examples) of non-reformist reform, explaining how they operate and how they produce radical social transformations. A particular focus of those examples

will be on cases in which non-reformist reforms have facilitated the institutionalisation of nowtopias. Secondly, we will focus on direct democracy initiatives developed “at the margin”. We will use examples of cases of popular self-rule initiatives that have surfaced as nowtopias, in order to consider the ways and conditions under which they have emerged as well as how and why they have failed or succeeded. Finally, we will use all this information to reflect on the relevance of direct democracy, non-reformist reform, and nowtopias for purposive degrowth transformations.

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