

Degrowth and Progress – Editorial Foreword

Part of Degrowth and Progress

Ida Hiršenfelder, Sara Buraya Boned

17 Feb 2021



Maja Smrekar, 'Survival Kit For The Anthropocene – Trailer,' 2015. Photo from an installation, photo by Borut Peterlin, design and architecture collaboration by Andrej Strehovec, production by Aksioma Institute.

Terrans tend to feel they've got to get ahead, make progress. The people of Winter, who always live in the Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence.

–Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

Following the e-publication *Austerity and Utopia*, L'Internationale Online presents a second collection of interventions to think through two apparently distant concepts. Artists, thinkers and researchers were invited to reflect on a dissimilar pair of themes as fertile ground for thought and proposition. With this new issue of *Degrowth and Progress*, we would like to pursue a path of reflection to interrogate the ambivalence of a possible progression of degrowth, and attempt to stage a bastard/hybrid scenario of speculative thought and action. This collection draws upon the complexity of ethical, ecological and political frameworks and reveals other perspectives on the current crisis through critical essays, storytelling, science

fiction, biomorphic design, audiovisual traces of artistic practices and allegorical maps. During the editing of this e-publication, humans have seen severe disruptions in the global narrative of what was understood as 'reality' and 'normality'. We have witnessed the downfall of democratic values, now stripped of diplomatic conduct they have been replaced by fragmented, isolated, and often fanatic dogmatism. At the same time, we have begun to deeply question our role on this planet, realising that we need to do nothing less than save the earth, its biodiversity, its habitable climate, its refined natural balance with humans, other animals and other beings. As Walter Benjamin reflected on the *Angelus Novus*, we clearly see the ruins of progress behind us.

Progress was the firstborn of modernity, a major promise of continuous development towards the perfection of 'humankind'. But progress in whose name? To whose benefit? With the exclusion of whom? Progress towards what kind of model? The notion of progress, besides being occidental-centric and linked to colonialism, has been the ideological framework for liberalism itself. The ideal of a continuous, progressive and desirable advancement of civilisation has been reframed in recent decades with 'sustainable development'. But isn't sustainability a concept far too simplistic to be able to address real questions of poverty, exploitation, segregation, congestion, depletion of land, desertification, terraforming, or the mass extinction of species? Could we think in a different direction of *progress*?

With such thoughts in mind, this volume starts with an introductory text by a dedicated proponent of the degrowth movement, **Vincent Liegey**, who unpacks the idea of progress and delineates ecological thought from sustainable development, showing how development is a continuation of colonialism. Degrowth is a relatively new concept, and sceptics are concerned that the notion is occidental-centric and doesn't address the inability of certain regions in the world to afford degrowth – it is impossible if a country has not already been 'developed'. Liegey shows that it is colonial thinking that creates this divide in the first place and that decolonisation of the dominant imaginary is necessary, along with the West being held accountable for its history of colonial pillage.

The Empirical Effect (2010), a film by **Rosa Barba**, introduced by **Cristina Cámara**, shows the tensions between humans and the forces of nature, and how humanity has to live with the desire as well as the failure of controlling this relationship. The film creates a beautiful metaphor for the progressive destruction humankind has created by depicting the constant threat that Mount Vesuvius imposes upon inhabitants.

Four decades after the Club of Rome report *The Limits to Growth* (1972), we can state that the results of Capitalocene development have led to a state of climatic and social emergency, whose consequences have been made even more visible by Covid-19. During the pandemic we have been actors and witnesses in an unforeseen picture, which has momentarily paused the chain of production and consumption on a global scale. But it has also made all the more visible the unequal distribution of wealth, sustenance and power. The premise of *degrowth* as a political, economic and social movement, and school of thought departs from a thesis that was considered until now practically impossible: that is, following what

Yayo Herrero synthesised about confinement, ‘to consume only what we need’ (Herrero 2020). But if the capitalist realism described by Mark Fisher could be reframed (Fisher 2009), even for a few months, new strands of prospective futures could, and must, be revisited.

In an online interview, **Silvia Federici** analyses the deep roots to the changes we are currently experiencing to our social, ecological and reproductive roles, which goes far beyond the crisis of the pandemic. Federici describes the foundational relation between the bankrupt notion of progress of the Enlightenment, the plantation economies reliant on slavery, and the solidification of a global system of extraction and domination. Through the lens of reproductive work and its central role in feminist struggles, she also speaks of the current sexual and racial division of labour and how new forms of telework are transforming homes into factories.

Vladan Joler takes us to the point of no return, deep into the black hole of digital data mining he calls ‘new extractivism’, signified by an affinity to infinity, to endless growth. In this map he shows how new frontiers of colonial exploitation are drawn in the digital world. Joler’s allegorical storytelling is an interplay between artistic research and data analysis, revealing the machinery of free/unpaid/slave digital labour. The bodies of each and every one of us are being colonised. We, as ‘dividuals’, are the final products being sold to advertisers. In this world, economy is no longer the trade of goods and services, rather it is the economy of the mind, such as the attention economy, the emotion economy, or the economy of beliefs. Joler’s allegorical map is written in the manner of speculative fiction, yet it is anything but. It is a realistic depiction of the echo chambers that produce radicalisation of the mind.

One of the incentives to produce this publication series was to better understand the economic structures that permeate every pore of our reality. On this note, **Ajda Pistotnik** shows international debt to be one of the main problems that keep whole countries bound to an agenda of unsustainable growth. The endless cycle of borrowing not only allows economies to grow, but forces them to grow even further in order to repay their debt, which inevitably leads to austerity measures and privatisation. In turn, she proposes strategies of debt resistance that could ensure at least partial cancellation of debt, resulting in political and social transformation which would promote the quality of life over the GDP.

Continuing with the thread of the critical essays, a conversation between **Monica Narula** and **Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez**, moderated by **Corina Oprea**, reveals some of the rigid structures in the system of art that propagate unsustainable and exclusive conditions. They ask difficult yet very practical questions related to travel in time, space and mind, which challenge the mobility of contemporary artists and artworks, while revealing the deep inequality between different localities in the ecosystem of the arts. They speak about methods of intervening and modifying the existing infrastructure to introduce more open, just and emotional relationships between everyone involved in contemporary art.

The self documentary video produced for this e-publication by transfeminist artist and researcher **Paula Pin Lage**, *Degrowth makes me grow*, is a first-person narrative about how the art system shapes the living conditions of artists through

the expectation of non-stop global travel in order to keep producing, while keeping one precarious. Her work, which resonates with the writing of Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Lynn Margulis and others, has explored the possibilities of feminist biohacking labs, reappropriating knowledge extracted by scientific institutions to create emancipatory techno-bio-political tools that enable control over access to the body and beyond. After years of living in the precarity of artistic work, she decided to abandon the unliveable rhythm of that productivity and return to her birthplace, a tiny village in Galicia, to experiment with other methods of creation in nature.

Through a collaborative performance *#PUNK 100% POP *N!GGA* **nora chipaumire** and **Ari Marcopoulos** test the methods of self-reliance, non-compliance and the non-commercial, non-complacency, destroying, re-purposing to create hybrid (choreographic, sonic, visual) art forms, which reclaim and give value to the African contribution to the world of ideas. chipaumire is seduced, as she says, 'by the possibility that there is no future, that the future is in the present' (2018).

Recounted in a dystopian tone, curator and writer **Marta Echaves's** short story *Precipitation* is a peek into a strange temporality where pandemics, diseases and synthetic drugs have become quotidian realities for humankind, in an uncomplacent science fiction story. Drones, pharmaceutical companies, liquid hallucinations and collective mourning assist Echaves in projecting a reality not as distant as we once imagined. We ask, is the nightmare of progress leading younger generations closer to the idea of human extinction?

In stark contrast to such nightmarish prospects, we end on a brighter note to address progress as means for the advancement of civilisation. In a text on the science-fiction author **Ursula K. Le Guin**, we travel to exoplanets only to arrive at our current human condition. Her speculative social and political systems reveal the possibility of imagining a different world and suggest that to change the mode of progress we have to drastically shift our perspective and imagine relations radically different to those that we currently take for granted. She presents a decisive ethical stance, coupled with an uncompromising ambivalence when it comes to judgement or ideological conviction.

Degrowth and Progress continues the current moment of prospective thinking, of taking the time to look to both the past and the present, of finding ways to act and take collective responsibility for our future. Political movements such as feminisms, environmentalism, struggles of the commons, digital activism and artistic practices are spaces where we can seek certain answers and propose radical change. Going back to 'normal' is no longer an option for the survival of non-human and human lives. Neither is it an option for the lives that deserve to be lived.

Note: This e-publication also contains works from the collections of the museums of L'Internationale, included with the desire to establish new connections between the authors' contributions, the artists and their works belonging to the museums of the confederation. On this occasion, the screening programme of L'Internationale Online will show *The Empirical Effect* (2010) by **Rosa Barba**, from 17 February to 17 April 2021, from the collection of Museo Reina Sofía, introduced by Cristina Cámara (Curator of Film and Video, MNCARS); another text by Ajda Pistotnik is

accompanied by **Staš Kleindienst**'s painting *A Landscape with Stray Dogs* (2019) from the collection of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.

References:

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, John Hunt Publishing, UK.

Herrero, Yayo. 2020. 'Antigones against the Monsters of Heartbreak: Imagine Everyday Utopias in Times of Pandemics'. Lecture in the framework of the online conference *Glossary of Common Knowledge: Commons / Solidarity*, organised by Moderna Galerija and Museo Reina Sofía: glossary.mg-lj.si.

chipaumire, nora, 2018. *#PUNK 100% POP *N!GGA*: companychipaumire.com.

The views and opinions published in this section mirror the principles of academic freedom and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the L'Internationale confederation and its members.

