

Marginal economy. Growth strategies for post-growth societies

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Abstract: A sharp problem focus sharpens the problem. Sustainably on-growing bodies of text on degrowth are not the key to post-growth scenarios because evocations of the limits of growth reinforce rather than transcend the economic principle, which is in the observation of scarcity. We therefore focus on alternative forms of growth rather than alternatives to growth. Our form-theoretical analysis of growth dismoralizes growth and disembeds it from the economic medium in which it is preferably drawn. We finally suggest that the key to a post-growth society is in a regrowth of interest in growth in so-far neglected non-economic function systems.

Keywords: Degrowth; systems theory; tetralemma; Luhmann; differentiation theory.

“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new”

A Socrates

1. Economy and society: a re-introduction

The Ancient Greek term *banausoi* denoted people who are busy with making money as manufacturers, traders, or financial investors. The pursuit of these banausic occupations was a token for poverty as it marked both the need for money and the absence of leisure time (Finley 1985, 60; Canovan 1977, 61). While respected citizens of the Hellenic polities devoted their leisure time to esteemed activities such as education, art, philosophy, or politics, thus obtaining further honor, “what we call the economy was properly the exclusive business of outsiders” (Finley 2011, 52). The Ancient Greek worldview was hence defined by a noble ignorance of economic realities, which might as well be true for Greek worldviews of today. The humor involved in this bad joke shows that things have changed. Today, the growth dogma is in the heart of the Western societies, which are hence considered economized (Urry 2010; Lash 2007; Alexander 1985; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Wallerstein 2004; Habermas and McCarthy 1985; Chomsky 1999; Polanyi 1957; Smart 2003; Çalışkan and Callon 2009, 2010; Latouche 2012; Fournier 2008). This circumstance can be and has been criticized ever since the dawn of capitalism. Yet, critiques of the commodification or economization of society have ever since remained confronted with the paradox that they co-create the problem they criticize.

In this article, it is our ambition to think out this well-known argument and demonstrates that claims against economization or for degrowth sustain rather than help

to overcome the very problem they aim to overcome, mainly because even the smartest problem focus therefore cannot help but sharpening the problem. To improve the situation, we shall therefore draw inspiration from key techniques of systemic therapies such as the externalization of problems and the shift from problems to resources or solutions (Carr 2000; McNamee and Gergen 1992; Sluzki 1992; Paritsis 2010). In this sense, we both share with degrowth, post-growth, or no-growth movements the aim of overcoming the economy-focus of contemporary societies and contradict any claims according to which voluntary degrowth strategies are unfeasible (Tokic 2012). Yet, for both reasons we insist on the fact any focus on *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows, Goldsmith, and Meadow 1972) or *The Need for Degrowth* (Reichel and Seeberg 2010; O'Neill 2012; Martinez-Alier 2012; Romano 2012) reinforces rather than transcends the economic principle, which is in the observation of scarcity. To make our case, we first draw on form theory (Spencer Brown 1979) to show that claims for a more *economical* use of our planet's scarce resources represent re-entries of the economic rationality (and therefore forms of hyper-economization) rather than alternatives to economization. We then take the form *growth* out of the economic medium in which it is implicitly drawn most of the time. We will then carry the form *growth* over into the medium of morality, in which it appears as neither inherently good nor inherently bad. From this we conclude that the current problems with growth are not in growth, but rather in the fact that both proponents and critiques of growth observe growth predominantly in the medium of the economy. As the observation of the economy inevitable refers to the medium of functional differentiation, however, we are able to demonstrate that the key to a new society is not in an ever-sharper focus on the old problem of more versus less economic growth, but rather in a *marginalization of the economy*. Rather, we shall show

that the higher goals of degrowth will be achieved by a strategic disinterest in the economy and a regrowth of interest in other function systems. Thus, our approach responds to urgent calls for escapes from the economy or alternatives to economization (Latouche 2012; Fournier 2008), the design of which is considered an “extraordinarily difficult problem” (Wright 2004, 321). In the light of a comprehensive view of functional differentiation developed in the final section of this article, we find that these escapes to a post-banauistic society may be not in the popular repoliticization of economic growth (Martínez-Alier et al. 2010; Fournier 2008; Latouche 2012; Baykan 2007), too. We therefore suggest *retooling* the analysis of complex problems fueled by capitalist growth (Anderson and M'Gonigle 2012, 44) by means of growing interest in the perspectives of those function systems that are still looked upon as onlookers of the cold tug-of-war of the political system and the economy. Rather than advocating voluntary economic simplicity (Alexander 2013), we instead make a case for more social complexity in the observation of growth.

2. The form *growth*: a paradox approach to the plus

This article is concerned with the development of new resources for the observation of a society less focused on economic growth. Such a society has often been heralded and hardly been seen in the so-called developed world for decades, if not for centuries. Explorations in de-growth, post-growth, or no-growth societies therefore need to either travel back in time or step aside to the alleged peripheries of the world society as long as they want to avoid the encounter with the unmarked space of the future. Yet, if the drawing of maps of future societies is exactly our ambition, then we find that this unmarked space (Spencer Brown 1979; Luhmann 1993, 1995a) is close to the ideal of a

blank sheet of paper on which any observation appears as differences that makes a difference (Bateson 1972). Like a sheet of paper becomes a map (and not a poem) only after the first lines have been drawn, it is the distinctions drawn (Spencer Brown 1979) that make the world in which they exist. The nature of this world, this “ultimate horizon of all meaning” (Luhmann 1995a, 69), is consequently defined by both its marked and unmarked corners, and the dividing lines drawn between them.

The world we explore by this article is, like any world, a world drawn by its own distinctions. We start from a blank sheet of paper, on which we draw a first distinction. Talking of growth, this first distinction is the distinction of growth and no-growth. Right from the start, our observation of growth is now confronted with the fundamental paradox involved in every form of observation, which is in the fact that every observation of something is performed by the distinction of this something from something else. “We take as given the idea of distinction and the idea of indication, and that we cannot make an indication without drawing a distinction. We take, therefore, the form of distinction for the form” (Spencer Brown 1979, 1). Just like all forms of observation, the observation of growth therefore represents an inherently paradox operation in which a duality is both unfolded and indicated as a unity. The starting point of our form theoretical observation is hence already a movement, i.e. the oscillation emerging from the observation that everything that appears is appearing only due to an indication which is based on the distinction of distinction and indication (Kauffman 1987, 58).

In the following, we will hence define growth as the distinction of *more versus less* (Luhmann and Barrett 2013, 316) or (+/-), respectively, with growth referring to both the (+)-side of the distinction and to the distinction itself. Set aside from this

fundamental observation paradox, growth does not immediately appear to be particularly paradox form of observation. Degrowth for its part, however, has been pointed out as a paradoxical form of growth observation not least because “one could hardly find a more inadequate term to describe a project positively intent on ecological democracy and frugal abundance” (Latouche 2012, 77). In fact, the paradox of degrowth is in the circumstance that degrowth first draws the growth distinction and then aspires to observe less of what it observes, thus fighting an unsustainable observation which it sustains by means of its own observations. In doing so, degrowth proponents worship the *growth fetish* (Hamilton 2004) as much as economics and economists are maybe rightly accused of doing (Kallis, Kerschner, and Martinez-Alier 2012). Yet, this paradox can be resolved in another paradox if we start to wonder why the degrowth-movement actually considers growth a problem and less growth a solution. The question is indeed whether less or more growth can be defined as positive or negative without any further context. In this sense, degrowth effectively points at the context of its own observation.

3. The higher amorality of the plus: a tetralemmatization of growth and degrowth

We will neither surprise nor offend anybody if we state that degrowth is about a moralization of growth. If we define moralization as the application of the moral code – good/bad (Luhmann 1992) – then the moralization growth is a particularly instructive case of moralization because the symbol for quantitative growth (+) is also commonly used to indicate moral quality, with the same being true for the negative sides of the code (see Table 1). The degrowth movement is now perfectly true in warning of all

kinds of semiotic short circuits implying that growth is inherently positive ($+ = +$) and no growth is essentially bad ($- = -$); at the same time, the movement is completely wrong in suggesting that a simple inversion of the poles could fix the problem ($- = +$ and $+ = -$).

		The code of the moral	
		+	-
The code of growth	+	$+ = +$	$+ = -$
	-	$- = +$	$- = -$

Table 1: The moralization of growth

Rather than supporting the proponents of either growth or degrowth, we first stress that either form of moralization is perfectly contingent and then wonder as to why these two combinations are often considered mutually exclusive. In fact, we are often invited to make a hard choice between the direct or the inverted short circuit, as if a positive attitude to growth ($+ = +$) necessarily implied a negative attitude to the absence of growth ($- = -$), and both attitudes contradicted the remaining options. A proven technique to broaden such narrow foci is the observation of *tetralemmas* (Sparrer and Varga von Kibéd 2000; Jayatilleke 1967), structures from traditional Indian logics, which have initially been used to define attitudes a judge in court can have towards two conflicting parties (see Table 2).

Neither growth nor degrowth	Either growth	Or degrowth
	Both growth and degrowth	

The fifth position

Table 2: The tetralemma of growth and degrowth

In looking at the classical structure of the tetralemma we find that the judge is not (only) caught in the dilemma of having to find in favor of *either* the one party *or* the other, but also can and must consider the option that *both* or *neither* of the parties make justified claims. *The fifth position* represents the idea that tetralemmas themselves are contingent forms of problem descriptions, thus responding to frequent calls for the integration of elements of surprise and ignorance in search for truth and knowledge (Gaudet 2013). Accordingly, the judge might eventually find that his particular observation of the tetralemma (or the observation of tetralemmas in general) is not appropriate.

The tetralemma of de-/growth is in the observation of the fact that we are not bound by a supposed dilemma between *either growth or degrowth*, but also have the option to assume that *both growth and degrowth* makes sense, or to suggest that *neither of the two worldviews* adequately addresses the challenges our societies are facing these day. The observation of the tetralemma of de-/growth hence both corroborates and makes it easier to manage the fact that any moralization of growth is contingent by nature. The moral problem with growth is obviously not in the observation of growth, but rather in the context in which growth is commonly observed. In this sense, we assume that even the strongest advocates of degrowth are not fundamentally skeptical about all forms of growth such as growth in numbers of members of the degrowth movement. This is why in the following we will defocus growth and instead look at the contexts in which growth is typically criticized.

4. Deconomizing the plus: The dilemma of growth and economization unfolded

If the context of growth rather than growth itself is the actual reason for claims for degrowth, then it turns out that, of all things, growth may be the key to degrowth. In order to turn growth from a problem into a solution, we only need to recall that growth is neither essentially good nor essentially bad and then ask for the contexts in which growth is considered a problem. In doing so, we find that the overwhelming majority of growth critique is concerned about *economic* growth in general and political implications of economic growth in particular, which is also true if growth is discussed against the background of its contribution to distributive *justice* (Muraca 2012). Yet, the contingency of this bias to the economy or the “political economy”, respectively, is hardly observed and often performed right at the level of the definition of growth itself. “Growth is basically the ‘vulgar’ name for what Marx analyzed as the endless accumulation of capital” (Latouche 2012, 76), and there is hardly any reason for stressing that Serge Latouche is not referring to cultural or social capital in this context. Growth is almost naturally considered as essentially economic as it is considered essential to the economy.

This invisibilized collapse of the distinctions non-/economy and no-/growth then allows for the observation of the paradox of growth critique (Berg and Hukkinen 2011), which obviously emerges even without paradoxological background and thus keeps the respective discourses going. This paradox can be observed in many different forms, the most obvious of which is that degrowth tries to fight fire with fire, which means that degrowth is about using the code of growth against the code of growth. Re-entries are

basically smart moves, in this particular case however, inverted re-entries such as *less is more* “will never be sexy” (Latouche 2012, 77) because people are observed to find it hard to define their lives as footprints of their omissions and abstinences as long as these forms of *less* are not good for a *more* of something. In this context, it is apparently not good enough that the higher goods of degrowth could not well be higher; that degrowth is a struggle for survival fought against the ignorance of the limits to growth; that “(t)o say that exponential growth is incompatible with a finite world and that our capacity for consumption must not exceed the biosphere's capacity for regeneration is so obvious that few would disagree” (Latouche 2009, 3). In fact, the most basic problem with the limits to growth is again that their evocation reinforces rather than challenges the economic principle, which is in the observation of scarcity. This scarcity is taken to the extremes if we keep on propagandizing limits to the access of the planet's limited resources and then extending these limits from the natural environment to the mental and social sphere. In the end, we are observing every classical socio-critical topos in terms “existential scarcity: anomie, injustice, stress, alienation, apathy and crime” (Daly 1977, 3). Still, the issue remains that all claims for a more economic use of scarce physical, mental, or social resources simply lead to the observation of more scarcity and thus to more economy. In observing the outside of the economy, the proponents of degrowth therefore have their share and shares in the extension of the economic principle and, consequently, in the very hyper-economization they criticize.¹ Capitalisms hyper-adaptive capability of growing with anti-capitalist criticism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) is no accident.

¹ Economization is apparently not only *performed* (Callon 2007; Çalışkan and Callon 2009) by pro-economists.

If it is true that the “(d)egrowth society cannot emerge from the iron cage of scarcity” (Latouche 2012, 77), then degrowth’s own scarcity focus prevents the emergence of the degrowth society.² A way out of this iron cage is in the observation that the economization and degrowth are *not* two sides of the same coin, and that we effectively can observe degrowth that sparks economization or growth which is not correlated with economization (see Table 3).

<p>Neither degrowth nor economization</p>	<p>Either degrowth</p>	<p>Or economization</p>
<p>Both degrowth and economization</p>		
<p><i>The fifth position</i></p>		

Table 3: The tetralemma degrowth and economization

In tetralemmatizing the former degrowth versus economization dilemma we furthermore find that both positive and negative critique of economic growth implicitly refers to functional differentiation, i.e. the distinction of function systems such as economy *and science, art, religion, the political system, the legal system or education*. This zoom-out of the problem of economic growth, and hence into the ecology of the index patient (Paritsis 2010), thus recalls the fact that the economy is just one function

² This paradox is true as long as degrowth implies that growth is an inherently economic phenomenon; as long as we equal the “dominant and unsustainable ethos of growth (...) with maximization of wealth or consumption” (Benton 2013, 353); as long as we look for alternatives to economic growth in alternative economies “such as cycling, reuse, vegetarianism or veganism, co-housing, agro-ecology, eco-villages, solidarity economy, consumer cooperatives, alternative (so called ethical) banks or credit cooperatives, decentralised renewable energy cooperatives” (Demaria et al. 2013, 202); as long as we suppose the answer to misrouted political economies to be in well-meaning political ecologies (Muraca 2013, 160).

system among others, and that economic growth is only one among other forms of growth that we could focus on. Particularly those who advocate an escape from the economy are sometimes at least implicitly supporting this approach by combining their claims for less economy with calls for a repoliticization of economic growth or the economy, respectively (Fournier 2008; Latouche 2012; Speth 2012). As natural as it appears to consider the transition to degrowth to be a political question (Cattaneo et al. 2012, 515), so too is this focus on the political system highly contingent. Why do our habits of mind seem to tell us that degrowth is a matter of politics, and not of religion, art, or sport? Why do we assume that, of all function systems, the political system, and, of all policies, again those policies focused on the economy should be the key to less economic growth? These and similar questions suggest a more comprehensive approach to ideally all of the different function systems, which is why in the following we shall systematically introduce the concept of functional differentiation and use it to explore different forms of both economic and non-economic growth.

5. The growth functions: the pluses of functional differentiation

Although the distinction of eigen-logic function systems is regarded as a key concept of modernity (Leydesdorff 2002; Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003; Berger 2003; Vanderstraeten 2005; Brier 2006; Baecker 2007; Kjaer 2010; Bergthaller and Schinko 2011; Valentinov 2013, 2015c), modern science has, as of yet, implied rather than studied functional differentiation. As a result, we are observing sometimes competing definitions of contemporary societies not only as *economized* (Urry 2010; Lash 2007; Alexander 1985; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Wallerstein 2004; Habermas and McCarthy 1985; Altvater and Mahnkopf 1996; Chomsky 1999; Polanyi 1957; Smart

2003; Çalışkan and Callon 2009, 2010; Latouche 2012; Fournier 2008), but also, e.g., as *politicized* (Chomsky 2000, 1997; Thompson 2006; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999), *mediatized* (Eaman 1987; Castells 1996; Mazzoleni 2008; Hjarvard 2008) or sometimes even *aestheticized* (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). In all these cases, the suffix designates a *too much* of the respective function and indicates a corresponding claim for degrowth, which also means that the claim for economic degrowth represents a perhaps popular, but definitely not an exclusive request for degrowth. In positive terms, we find that all function systems can be subject to claims for either degrowth or growth. If we furthermore agree that, e.g., that there is no existential need for limits to esthetic, scientific or spiritual growth, and that some of these forms of growth may even be considered necessary conditions for degrowth (Sessions and Devall 1985), then we find that the number of logical alternatives to economic growth is limited only by the number of function systems. Recent attempts to counterbalance a certain inflation of ill defined function systems and hence to degrow the number of function systems to the logical minimum will certainly soon trigger the discovery of new ones. As of now, however, ten canonic function systems have been identified (Roth and Schütz 2015). These ten systems are listed in Table 4, as are examples of organizations that are commonly associated with the function system.

Function System	Organization
Political System	Party
Economy	Firm
Science	Laboratory
Art	Atelier
Religion	Church
Legal System	School
Sport	Sports Club
Health	Court
Education	Hospital
Mass Media	Publisher

Table 4: Bugs in a black box relationship

The main function of Table 4 is to show that functional differentiation works even without requiring a precise idea of what functional differentiation actually is, which is indicated by the circumstance most of us will find it easy to fix the bugs in the present list. It is hence safe to assume that considerable parts of the world population possess at least tacit knowledge of functional differentiation even though or precisely because this form of differentiation is fundamentally different from earlier forms of social differentiation (Luhmann 1977, 1995b).

Early societies were segmented into analytically *similar and equal subsystems* such as families and tribes (see Table 5).

		Equal	
		+	-
Similar	+	<i>Segmentation</i> (Families, tribes, nations, etc.)	<i>Centralization</i> (Civilizations, empires, etc.)
	-	Functional Differentiation (Economy, Science, Art, etc.)	<i>Stratification</i> (Castes, estates, classes, etc.)

Table 5: Social differentiation (Roth 2015, 113).

During the Neolithic revolution, however, some segments turned into centers and others into peripheries, which resulted in the distinction of *similar, but unequal* subsystems. This distinction however was soon superposed by the distinction of *dissimilar and unequal* subsystems, which is commonly associated with the development of hierarchical social orders such as the Indian caste system or the Occidental Estates of the Realm. Functional differentiation, finally superposed stratification, which can be recognized by the fact that, today, e.g., we would not automatically consider persons better scientists just because they are Brahmins or Barons.

Functional differentiation of *dissimilar and equal* subsystems hence closes the gap within a 2x2 matrix of social differentiation, and is already quite well defined by what it is not.

Functional differentiation is said to have turned the former universe of stratification into a multiverse in which “society remains the same but appears as different depending upon the functional subsystem (politics, economy, science, mass media, education, religion, art, and so on) that describes it” (Luhmann 1995a). At the same time, the individual function systems are incommensurable. In fact, it is impossible to prove that politics essentially is more important than the economy or religion, or the art more

important than science or sport. It is then precisely because of the mutual exclusive and functional equivalent nature of the function systems that the individual segments or strata of society are likely to feature different preferences for a *more* or a *less* of each of these functions. “On this background, it is possible to understand asymmetries, crowding-out effects, and negative externalities between functionally differentiated spheres as a central source of tension and conflict in modern society” (Kjaer, 2010:494). In this sense, what is commonly observed as a paradoxal conflict between more or less (economic) growth can also be observed in terms of different preferences for growth in different spheres of society. The way out of the dead end of the traditional *degrowth or collapse* (Romano 2012) dilemma is therefore not in a focus on less economization, but in a both broader and more focused view on the entire scope of functional differentiation that allows for the rediscovery and mapping of non-economic areas of development and growth. A reconsideration of these currently neglected growth areas could result in a situation in which definitions of society would not focus on supposed excesses of one single function systems, but rather on constellations of trends of all known function systems (see Figure 1).

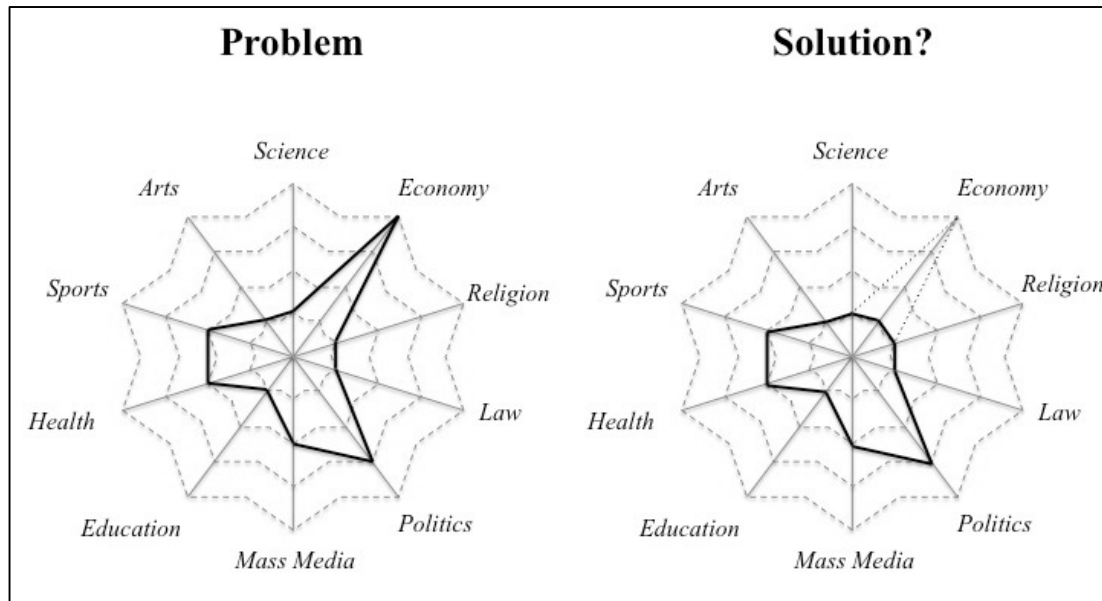


Figure 1: Degrowth's problem description and vision

In looking at the economization of society problem from this angle, we find that economic degrowth would not be a solution even if claims for a more economic use of scarce resources did not contribute to the propagation of the economic principle. Degrowth is also a problem rather than a solution because its only clear vision is less economy, at best paired with more politics, the latter of which is paradoxically supposed to be more focused on – *less* – economic growth again. Either as economic fact or as economic policy, however, less economic growth leads to more poverty if it is not counterbalanced by more of something else. Just less is not more. It is just less. Less of anything but scarcity.

Thus, the only *deconomizing* observation that ecology as economy 2.0 actually can provide to the original economy is that growth takes place in all function systems of society, in some of which it is based on resources that are inexhaustible and thus inaccessible for the economy. Full stop. The *secret of deconomization* is to focus all of

our energy not on fighting economic growth, but on growing what we want to grow instead.

6. Deconomization: An outlook on growth strategies for post-growth societies

Our form-theoretical observation of growth showed that the most prominent problems attributed to growth are not inherent to growth, but can only be observed if the form growth is implicitly drawn in the economic media. Evocations of the limits to growth can therefore not be considered key to post-growth scenarios. This is true, first, because any claim for a more *economic* use of scarce resources simply leads to more economy; and, second, because growth is not per se economic, which is obvious because it is easy to imagine many different forms of growth, some of which even degrowth proponents might be in favor of. In this sense, we also disagree with the idea that “the never-ending pursuit of growth is incompatible with the planet’s ‘basics’” (Latouche 2009, 2), again just because growth is not economic by nature and there are areas of growth in society where growth is not dangerous and where resources are inexhaustible or simply unobservable by an ecological-economical gaze. The alternative is therefore not *degrowth or collapse* (Romano 2012), just because there are forms of growth that could help to prevent collapses, among which we could even count the repoliticization of growth (Fournier 2008) as long as the corresponding policies are not about a stronger focus on economic de-/growth again. *Degrowth or regrowth* (Whitehead 2013) is therefore not about more or less economic growth only, but rather about more or less of growth within an entire constellation of function systems. In this context, any particular focus on the economy, be it positive or negative, will have dysfunctional effects if the aim of our intervention really is less economic growth. The alternative clearly is in a

marginalization of the economy or deconomization of society. We hence do not necessarily need to “succeed in creating a new fractal to replace the fractal of growth” (Perey 2014, 219). To achieve the degrowth goals we could simply challenge the implicit economy-connotation that is currently so tightly associated with the concept growth. If we stop considering the economic growth function as prime solution or problem, then we will be able to focus on those functions that we actually want to grow. This is not to promote an uncritical attitude to economic challenges, but rather to challenge the idea that economic issues are essentially more fundamental, critical, or simply important than scientific, religious, or mass media-related ones. We thus support calls for more socio-economic diversity (Matutinović 2002, 2006), with the stress being on the *socio*, thus presenting a more social theoretical and less ethical version of the idea that a “cultural and ethical approach to environmental problems might be a promising direction of research” (Matutinović 2007, 1110). Our approach also corresponds to recent works arguing that the economy may be more or less sensitive to its social environment and stressing how important it is to increase this sensitivity without trying to undermine the necessary eigenlogic of the function system economy (Valentinov 2015a, 2015b). In fact, we suggest that a less pronounced focus on society opens a path to a less egocentric and nonetheless functional economy, too. In other words: Not only economists, but also the entire economic system might well be capable of drawing “lasting inspiration from (...) art philosophy, pedagogy, novels, and poetry” (Berger 2015, 731) and key contributions of other non-economic function systems of society.

To embark to these and similar promising fields of research, all we need to do is run one or two critical updates in functional differentiation, and then to claim *the never-ending*

pursuit of growth back for society, and leave degrowth for the economy. The only challenge involved in this approach is that both neoclassical and political or ecological economists might find it unpleasant to imagine a future in which the economy is neither a prominent solution nor a prominent problem to society anymore. In fact, and for understandable reasons, it may be true that advocates of degrowth are much more interested in the observation of an alternative economy than in an observation of a post-growth society. This, however, may be an issue insofar as one of the most consequent visions of a post-growth future clearly is a society in which the economy is neither regulated nor promoted, but rather consequently ignored.

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