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# **Manifest**

## **for a Convivial Degrowth**

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*To you who are preoccupied  
with the future of following generations.*

## Manifest for a Convivial Degrowth

To you who are preoccupied with the future of following generations.

We live in a world in crisis. Left or right, all are in agreement on that. Yet, the proposed solutions, be they neo-liberal or progressive, remain in the paradigm of development and economic growth, even though that paradigm is itself a major cause of many of the problems.

Following in the footsteps of the European Movement of Sustainable Economic Degrowth<sup>1</sup> (le mouvement européen de la décroissance économique soutenable), we invite the citizens of Quebec to consider an overview of the current system, in particular of the ecological and social problems.

Degrowth is a challenge to 'economic growth', an expression that gives a bright and positive connotation to phenomena which are destructive to ecosystems and the social fabric. Productivist economic development increases the gap between the rich and the poor while increasing the production of 'wealth' does not generally improve the human condition. The growth of companies does not keep them from cutting jobs to increase their profits, rendering worthless the pro-growth argument for the creation of jobs. Besides, the continually increasing production of consumer goods eats away the resources that constitute our ecological capital, and generates pollution and garbage by the ton. War, oil spills, and multi-car pile-ups are examples of events that increase the gross interior product, an indicator used to evaluate the health of nations; this analysis of human activity gives an inexact portrait of reality. As many before us have done, we affirm that the economy must stop dictating decisions at all levels and become again a means at the service of human beings.

culture, where the pleasure in being of service, the creativity of the clever, and the simplicity of neighbourliness are well known, even if they are more and more difficult to express in a world where the growth ideology incites us to distrust others – for mutual aid hurts the economy!

The degrowth movement is not an Utopia. We believe that it is possible, by beginning today, in a thousand ways, to take a turn towards a social organization that is truly sustainable, and convivial to boot! And you?

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.decroissance.qc.ca> for a list of links on the subject of degrowth (décroissance).

of the consequences of our standard of living, together with experience with subsistence alternatives that permit a real autonomy of communities, will lead to choices that will benefit the populations concerned by giving back to them power over their future, all while preserving the ecological balance.

We cannot share the resources as long as we respect the right to wealth and nourish dreams of opulence. To establish a society that truly respects people and nature, it is essential that we revise our values and notably that we reject accumulation and competition. To sustain the ecosystems and biodiversity, there cannot be any millionaires. Concerning the survival of the human species, it is essential to cultivate detachment from the lure of gain.

Are we dreamers more than those who claim that a pool, a private jet, and food cultivated on the other side of the world are accessible to anyone who is sufficiently determined? Are we dreamers more than those who still believe in happiness by accumulation of wealth and frenzied work? Dreamers more than those who believe that they are working for the future of their children by amassing fortunes in a tax haven?

In the way of an adolescent, humanity is living in the rhythm of excess, intoxicated by the feeling of power of its accomplishments. It is time to turn the page on this era of thoughtlessness and collectively to grow up a little. If we do not undertake a real search for balance founded on the recognition and respect of the limits of the Earth, upsets are to be expected much worse than those ensuing from the transition towards a non-productionist economy, whether it be capitalist or socialist. The “necessity” of economic growth is not an absolute constraint, but the physical limits of the planet are.

Our position could seem to be disconcerting, but the values of solidarity that underlie it are already well anchored in Quebec

Degrowth is not a simplistic and moralizing ideology, but a call to reflection founded on an indisputable fact: on a limited planet, unlimited growth, the goal of all our governments, is impossible. Such growth leads to imbalances that are more and more dangerous.

#### **Four Intimately Related Crises**

Ecological crisis, firstly. There is no need to remind anyone that since industrialization, human beings have caused thousands of species to disappear, polluted the air, water, and soil, decimated forests, produced enough green-house gasses to modify the climate, to melt the glaciers, and to raise sea level, all with uncontrollable consequences. The world population is consuming as if we had a planet and a half. If the six billion inhabitants of the planet could succeed in attaining the lifestyle that the industrialized countries flash around the world, it is six planets that we would need<sup>2</sup>.

Social crisis, still. In spite of all the promises of the growth ideology, malnutrition and food insecurity compromise the health of millions of people, in the third world and in industrialized countries, including us. At the same time, illnesses related to the American way of life and its pollution wreak havoc: asthma, cancer, allergies, obesity, cardio-vascular diseases, mental health problems, etc. Thousands of people experience episodes of professional burn-out for having worked too much while thousands of other people are excluded from the work force and are treated with contempt.

Crisis of meaning, always. Stress and the feeling of emptiness cause depression and suicide. Carried away by the whirlwind of productivism and consumerism, we don't have the time to realize that our freedom is limited to choosing between products and

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<sup>2</sup> See *Notre empreinte écologique*, Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, Écosociété, 1999, 216 pages.

identifying oneself by trademarks. The true meaning of life, a quest in itself, has been erased from the program. Continually occupied, agitated, amused, we no longer have the possibility to ponder, even though we consume goods, services, and even our relationships. Human ties are out of place in a system where the cultivated reflex is to search out our greatest profit, to the detriment of any solidarity. Connected to the mass media which give an illusion that we are not alone, we realize helplessly that we have difficulty to be, simply to be, with our fellow man.

Political crisis, lastly. Disillusioned citizens have no confidence in politicians. Not surprising, since the multinationals impose their rules with the complicity of the governments in power. Big unelected institutions, such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, make decisions that affect the lives of entire peoples who don't have any say. Protests are repressed by the police force, if not by the legislature and judges<sup>3</sup>. What is it, then, that justifies the fact that financial interests of enterprises carry more weight than the rights of peoples?

We, "objectors of growth", deplore the devastation provoked by the ideology of growth and all the conditions that cause that growth.

## **Dead Ends**

To all those who carry the banner of sustainable development, we want to underline the insidious dangers of this approach

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<sup>3</sup> The famous SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation). There have been at least four cases recently in Quebec: Quebec Association for the Fight Against Atmospheric Pollution (Association québécoise de lutte contre la pollution atmosphérique); Association of the People of l'Île d'Orléans Against the Methane Port (Association des gens de l'Île d'Orléans contre le port méthanier); the publishing house, Les Éditions Écosociété; and the magazine, À Babord. See: <http://www.taisez-vous.org>.

A society in transition towards a paradigm other than that of economic growth will favour part-time work, the time thus gained allowing individuals and communities to put in place projects that increase their autonomy in satisfying their needs. Means of slowing traffic, incentive parking, free public transport, and the installation of pedestrian streets and cycle paths are all actions in the direction of a relearning of active transport and of being truly present in the world. In order to restore the equilibrium in the distribution of wealth, it would be imaginable to decree that the spread of revenues within a given enterprise shall not exceed a certain fixed level and fiscal tools that redistribute between the richest and poorest, thus acting against inequity and diminishing the power of those who have the greatest negative impact on nature, be it by their high level of consuming or by their investments which "keep the economy moving".

Evidently, numerous businesses whose activities are useful only in a system of economic growth (publicity, disposable objects, petroleum products, etc.) will, sooner or later, have no choice but to slow down and then stop their production, upsetting the employment situation. That is why it is important for us to develop new capabilities and to retool ourselves towards an increased non-merchant autonomy.

Factory closures, devastating events in a small community, could be the occasion to imagine a region's economy differently. As a general rule, we are prepared to invest millions of dollars to retain jobs, while considering neither the pertinence of that which is produced nor the consequences of its production. For most people, consuming and credit are established practices that must not be questioned, even more so since the current economic system doesn't really offer any other choice. We have hope that an education that is realistic in its treatment

accumulation will gnash its teeth in the face of scarcity and the effort to provide. But beyond the fear of shortage and discomfort, these new structures will change our relationships with others and with nature. In fulfilling our need to belong in a community and in a place, they will favour a meaningful existence.

It is important to note that the application of these simple and accessible means, that represent for us a decrease in consuming (and an increase in the quality of life!), would favour in several third-world countries, currently starved by the system of production and consuming of so-called developed societies, an increase in their access to goods and services, establishing a greater planet-wide justice, which justice is ecologically impossible if we maintain our standard of living.

### **Paths for the Transformation**

Are we dreamers? Maybe we should ask the question differently: are we dreamers more than those who think that they are improving the general well-being by maintaining a strong economic growth?

The current society is very complex and appears to be unchangeable. How can one even imagine that things could be different? Evidently, it will be a long process, a change in thinking, a taking of control of the situation both at the individual and collective levels. Voluntary simplicity, at the individual level, is an essential step, permitting the liberation of time for us to educate ourselves, to read, to reflect, and to experiment with ways of doing things that will be central to a degrowth society: gardening, personal growth, artisan techniques, repairs, co-operative volunteer work, etc. It is in a movement for convivial economic degrowth, which is the collective equivalent of the principles of balance of voluntary simplicity, that this responsible way of life makes full sense.

which is usually well intentioned but often salvaged by the public relations departments of large enterprises. The expression, “sustainable development”, which came from the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission, presupposes the possibility of respecting the environment in the context of economic growth and proposes meeting present needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet theirs. In making growth a necessity, sustainable development abandons any serious attempt to eliminate harmful economic activities. In wanting to meet present needs candidly, sustainable development avoids questioning them. The satisfaction of our “needs” of mobility, comfort, and telecommunications prepares for future generations a legacy of pollution, climatic catastrophe, and waste, among others.

A company that recycles its paper can claim to be an adherent of sustainable development, all the while exporting across thousands of kilometres disposable objects that some weeks later will be found in a land-fill site. The movement for responsible consumerism has succeeded in convincing part of the population to consume products that are fair trade, local, without pesticides, organic, eco-energy ... Small steps in the right direction? Sudden awareness? We want to believe it. But the possibility of making “ethical purchases” sidesteps the question of the necessary reduction in consuming (the only direct means to reduce pollution, green-house gas emissions, waste production). In the same manner, a rebound effect has been observed with eco-energy technologies: because a machine consumes less, consumers have a tendency to use it more or to spend the money thus saved on other consumer goods, with the consequence of an over-all increase in the use of material or energy resources.

What about this other avenue, so comforting at first glance: believing that technology will provide solutions to

ecological preoccupations? Electric cars, decontamination, genetically modified organisms, bio-gas and ethanol, etc. Unfortunately, these 'solutions' are not without consequences. Producing ethanol, for example, demands that we dedicate much agricultural land to corn monoculture, thus destroying biodiversity and resulting in the intensive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers that impoverish the soil and pollute the water. We live in a world that systematically favours progress and technological innovation without considering their consequences as a whole, forgetting that it is this same faith that engendered the ecological disasters that technology intends today to solve. Thus, an advanced medical technology, unthinkable outside of an industrialized society, enables the care of cancer ... that is due to the pollution caused by industrialization.

Let's examine a little how the ideology of progress, that goes along with that of growth, causes more harm than it can repair.

First of all, the frenzy of innovation shortens the life cycle of objects, whose obsolescence is planned. A person hoping to have an appliance repaired must act with conviction to renounce the attractive new model and to find, when it is still possible, the parts and a qualified repairman. For example, buying a new toaster costs less than repairing the one that we already have. Rapidly, objects find their way to landfill sites, after having participated in the exploitation of the people who make them, the waste of resources, the consumption of energy, and the production of pollution. These phenomena are legitimized by the imperative of growth, even if the exploitation of natural resources engenders deadly conflicts and waste management costs astronomical sums. This ideology, which claims that the accumulation of riches is legitimate, sensible, and necessary, justifies all means of making money and increasing growth: merchandizing of water, exploiting children, wars over petroleum – and deceptive marketing.

does his errands on foot, bike, trike, or by tramway, taking narrow alleyways bordered with gardens. Why not import the European model of small villages, thus avoiding travelling thousands of kilometres overseas to visit them as a tourist? Let us simply exchange our recipes rather than shipping cargos of cookies from overseas.

An ecological society has a very different relationship with mobility. Food security incites local production of staple foods. Gardening, even in the city, is a natural element in the society. Production entities, being on a small scale, are established directly in the communities, thus eliminating industrial parks that devastate the landscape and avoiding the need for people to commute dozens of kilometres each day to go to work. The shipping of merchandise is also reduced a great deal. Municipal and national railways offer a rapid and economical service, as was the case before the oil and automobile industries dismantled them<sup>4</sup>. In a society that leaves people with free time, active transport, by foot or bike, occupies a place of choice. Urban streets and boulevards are converted into bike paths and walkways bordered with parks. Because we swallow up less of our resources in road repair and bridge construction, the resources are available for maintaining the railways and for the installation of snow- and wind-sheltered corridors for bikes in winter, for example. In a society that thus favours physical activity, relaxation, a healthy environment, and natural food, medicine occupies a place that is far less significant. And we could continue for a long time sketching the portrait of a society that is decoupled from growth.

Evidently, such a society would not be an all-healing elixir. More than ever, we will have to face the challenge of living together. The frightened part of us that seeks security in

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<sup>4</sup> See *Le livre noir de l'automobile* (The Automobile Black Book), Richard Bergeron, Hypothèse, 1999, 435 pages.

favouring healthy environments, the participation by the greatest number of people in decisions, mutual aid and free human exchanges, creativity, and occasions to blossom. What would this society look like? How to take steps in this direction?

This reflection directly addresses the challenge of living together and of sharing the wealth. In the society that we envision, as in all communities centred on the satisfaction of needs (and not on the creation of renewable material desires), the economy consists of exchanges of goods and services on a small scale. Work is an occasion to participate in community life according to one's talents and abilities, and not a yoke that is necessary in order to obtain things to consume. Production entities are on a small scale and use machines that are simple to repair and are economic in use. For example: mechanical weaving looms that are driven by human energy or animal energy, the latter permitting a production much greater than can be achieved manually, without requiring the billions of dollars of capital for the construction and operation of an industrial manufacture and without giving rise to the ecological disruptions. Efficiency should not be the primary goal of work; time is not money; it is a space in which one can blossom.

If we claim that industrialization has permitted the production of objects at least cost, it is because we do not account for the pollution of the air, water, and soil; the physical and mental illnesses suffered by the employees of industry; the rural exile; and waste management. In a degrowth society, talents and abilities are devoted to fabricating objects that are aesthetic and durable. The attention given to objects reflects respect for the material from which they are fabricated and for the work that has gone into them: we maintain and repair them for generations. Shoemakers, seamstresses, upholsterers, cooks, cabinet makers, carpenters, and repair technicians of all kinds thus have shops in local communities where each person

We are, in spite of ourselves, ignorant of the web of dependence that is implied by using a technology. For us to use a toaster, there had to be the factory, the transportation system, the production and transport of electricity. Technological appliances do not exist alone; they imply a considerable underlying organization. We claim that the Internet and computers reduce the use of paper, but they are all connected to printers and we also forget that such means of communication are possible only in an industrialized society which has already caused an immense waste and continues to squander resources (paper among others), if only in the packaging of parts which are trotted from one end of the planet to the other. And we forget the tons of obsolete computers that are nothing less than toxic waste. In the same manner, we are presented with the automobile as the freedom to move about, the pleasure of driving, the symbol of success. But this mode of transportation implies kilometres of asphalt, pollution, disfigurement of the countryside, noise, urbanism that isolates different walks of life, petroleum wars, without counting the thousands of deaths caused by accidents.

Moreover, we become completely dependent on technology, incapable of functioning without it, incapable for the most part to understand how it works and to repair it when its appliances break. Technological innovations require great financial investments for research, development, and production. Entrusting the capital holders and big enterprise with the safekeeping of the environment ultimately means surrendering to them the possibility of populations taking charge of their community life.

We call these machines "tools", but it is important to realize that they are not neutral objects that we can use as we see fit or according to our principles. Their use enrolls us in a vast system of constraints, and even more it transforms us, changing our relations with time, space, other human beings.

Technology metamorphoses our vision of the world and even our principles.

Let's be clear: degrowth is not a desire for an impossible return to the past. It is a lucid choice of inventions. Degrowth is ceasing to believe that new is better: a selection needs to be made from the offerings of technology. For us, certain inventions should be abandoned completely; for example, nuclear energy and the atomic bomb. Others, such as the air plane and varied types of motorized transport, should see their use seriously reduced. In brief, technologies having an effect of mobilizing ever more resources should be abandoned. That doesn't mean to say that all technological progress should be forgotten. Think about the latest technologies in organic agriculture that allow us to discover new advantages of companion planting. We will welcome inventions and technologies that will help humanity to live more simply.

### **Getting Out of Growth**

Having noted this state of affairs allows us to affirm that the ideology of Progress, that conceives that Man, master of nature, advances inevitably in the improvement of the world, and the ideology of economic growth, founded over two hundred years ago, are not at all in harmony with the reality of the XXIst century.

The dominant ideology asserts that economic growth is desirable, necessary, and inevitable. A law of nature, they say. Evidently, all living organisms grow, but such growth stabilizes itself rapidly. Infinite growth is a human mental construct, not an economic fatality.

The dominant thinking also invokes human nature to justify the "inevitable" pursuit of short-term profit. Our species has

survived nevertheless for millions of years thanks to mutual aid and co-operation... We believe that human nature is not limited to its economic function and possesses multiple facets. We are that which we cultivate in ourselves. We believe that it is possible to cultivate intelligence, creativity, and good will in human beings to participate in a radical cultural change that appreciates the worth of people and community.

In any case, as economic growth reposes on a large consumption of fossil energy, for which diminishing production capacity is foretold for coming decades, and which will not be possible to easily replace, significant disruptions of the current system are to be expected. That is the reason for the urgency to rethink things beyond the growth ideology.

Evidently, in an economic system such as we have today, negative growth signifies recession, with all the problematic consequences in the daily lives of millions of people who lose the financial means to meet their needs. The degrowth movement does not recommend recession. But given the pure-and-simple ecological impossibility to continue infinite growth, the "objectors of growth" propose an attempt to get out of the growth paradigm. It is a matter of preparing, and this with a concern for social justice, the societies for the challenges of the physical limits of the biosphere.

### **Re-Inventing Living Together**

Let us detach ourselves from the existing structures and economic pseudo-constraints in order to conceive a project that is truly human, a project that is truly realist, a project of living according to our needs and our true resources, in harmony with our environment. Drawing on our experience with voluntary simplicity, we are convinced that a degrowth society, that will repose on taking control of their needs by the populations, on a small scale, will result in an improvement in the quality of life by