Degrowth, modernity, and the open society

Sebastian Strunz, Bartosz Bartkowski

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Sebastian Strunz[1*] and Bartosz Bartkowski[1]

[1]Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ, Permoser Str. 15, 04318 Leipzig

*corresponding author: Sebastian.strunz@ufz.de

Abstract: Critiques of modernity often align with critiques of the existing institutions of liberal democracy. We argue that the degrowth movement can learn from the experience of past critiques of modernity by avoiding their major mistake – that is, (inadvertently) conflating a critique of modernity with a rejection of liberal democratic institutions. Hence, we suggest to frame degrowth as the promotion of new vocabularies within a deliberative account of democracy. Specifically, we proceed in three steps: first, we briefly review some essential critiques of modernity and their stance towards liberal democracy. Second, we illustrate how some of the argumentative patterns within the degrowth literature may inadvertently endanger core values of the open society. Third, we introduce our perspective on a liberal degrowth that aims to fulfil the "unfinished project of modernity".

1. Liberal democracy on the defense

Liberal democracy is on the defense. A cultural backlash against "liberal cosmopolitanism" currently drives right-wing populism around the world (Inglehart and Norris 2016). For decades already, the support for democracy as a form of government has been receding worldwide, especially so among the younger generations (Foa and Mounk 2017). Meanwhile, in left-alternative debates, calls arise for radical transformations away from the founding institutions of liberal capitalist democracies, such as private property (van Griethuysen 2012) or markets as means of resource allocation (Trainer 2011: 80). What is more, fundamental democratic institutions are explicitly up for re-consideration: "I am not afraid to draw the conclusion that emancipatory politics should not be bound *a priori* by formal democratic procedures; people quite often do not know what they want, or do not want what they know, or they simply want the wrong thing" (Žižek, interviewed in Browne 2016).

Furthermore, critiques of liberal democracy often originate from or align with critiques of modernity. Authors such as Illich, Marcuse and Heidegger, who offered more general critiques of modern culture and society, also displayed an ambivalent if not hostile attitude towards the institutions of liberal democracy. For a historical example, consider Germany's embrace of National Socialism in the 1930s, which has been interpreted as a "crisis of modernity" (Schwaabe 2005): the discontents caused by industrialized capitalism and mass culture, including a deep sense of uncertainty and alienation, gave rise to mental dispositions highly receptive for anti-liberal ideologies. The Third Reich also illustrates the possibility of "reactionary modernism", in that technological and scientific progress continued in full contempt of political liberalism as a main ideological tenet of modernity (Herf 1984). So we are confronted with a conflicted overall relation between modernity, liberal democracy and their critics. The interest of the present paper, then, is for the following prospect: a radical critique of modernity may entail a rejection of (some) existing institutions of liberal democracy – thereby (and possibly inadvertently) endangering core values of the open society.

Given this context, what is the degrowth movement's stance towards liberal democracy? As the degrowth movement is very heterogeneous, no clear and unanimous answer exists. Consider the empirical survey by Eversberg and Schmelzer (2017), who surveyed the attitudes of attendants to the 2014 International Degrowth Conference: they portray a "degrowth spectrum" characterized by "conflictual diversity", within which they delineate five main currents. Amongst these currents, the "immanent reformers" promote "a pragmatic and gradualist transformation within existing institutions" (ibid.: 14f). By contrast, the "sufficiency-oriented critics of civilization" perceive "contemporary society as rotten to the core and ultimately doomed" (ibid.: 13); thus, they regard institutional reforms as futile and suggest to better prepare for the inevitable civilizational collapse.

Against this background, we explore the ambivalent relation between degrowth, modernity, and liberal democracy. As conceptual focal point of our analysis serves the "unfinished project of modernity" (Habermas 1994[1980]), that is, the striving for a just society via the autonomous development of science, morality, law and the arts. Basically, this concept aims to capture the legacy of the Enlightenment. In this context, a minimum specification of an overall attitude that is in line with the project of modernity can be found in Popper's (2011[1945]:

513) notion of the "open society" – a society "in which men have learned to be to some extent critical of taboos, and to base decision on the authority of their own intelligence (after discussion)." Liberal democracy figures as the *current* institutional embodiment of this notion. In other words, liberal democracy is the provisional answer to the question: "How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?" (Popper 2011[1945]: 115). This is – admittedly and purposely – a very modest minimum requirement with two implications: First, a wide variety of actual political and economic institutions may practically fulfil this requirement. Amongst others, one might think of a highly decentralized political system based on participatory processes and democratic control over significant parts of the economy. Second, none of this implies the appeal to a universalist, a-historic conception of reason. On the contrary, moral and societal progress can be understood as the widening and deepening of solidarity (Rorty 1987) – past examples might include suffrage for woman, social security and universal healthcare, more recent examples being same-sex marriage and animal rights.

Still, existing liberal democracies clearly fall short of fully delivering on the promises of the project of modernity, so a crucial issue reads: is the project to be abandoned as a whole or is it just unfinished, as Habermas and others have thought? Does it offer enough to justify being continually revised and reconstructed? After all, modernity is a *normative* project based on the premise that, in principle, social progress is possible and desirable. Our main argument, then, reads as follows: the degrowth movement may learn from the experience of past critiques of modernity by avoiding their major mistake – that is, (inadvertently) conflating a critique of modernity with a rejection of the open society. Against this backdrop, we follow Rorty's (1987) suggestion to base our "social hopes" on the promotion of new vocabularies: from this perspective, the degrowth movement is about increasing the range of people who use a specific vocabulary – one that revolves around notions such as "sufficiency" and "conviviality" rather than "net worth" or "efficient market hypothesis". We also draw on Habermas' (1984; 1987), Sen's (2009) and others' understanding of democracy through the lens of public deliberation, with less focus on specific institutions such as elections. By enriching Habermas' notion of the unfinished project of modernity with Rorty's and Popper's perspectives, we sketch possible elements of a liberal approach to degrowth. In a nutshell: Popper sets the minimal standards for the values prevalent in the open society and Rorty demonstrates how liberal degrowthists may advance Habermas's vision of fulfilling the project of modernity.[1] Overall, the aim is to tackle the hypertrophies of modernity without losing its many achievements. In this sense, we argue that the degrowth movement needs to clarify its stance towards modernity and its different aspects, lest it endangers liberal democracy by trying to remedy the ills modernity has brought about.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 exemplarily reviews some influential and instructive cases of modernity critique (Heidegger, Illich, Marcuse and Zerzan) in comparison with Habermas's vision. Subsequently, Section 3 traces ambivalence towards liberal democ-

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[1] We do not intend to devise here an encompassing and systematic theory of modernity ourselves and we acknowledge some differences between the authors drawn upon: For instance, we are aware that Habermas has in mind a more ambitious concept of reason than Popper, and that the combination of Rorty's approach with elements of Habermas' deliberative democratic theory may be seen as challenging; yet this combination is neither impossible nor insensible, as we hope to demonstrate (see also Dieleman 2017; Niżnik and Sanders 1996).

racy by some strands of the degrowth movement and relates them to general doubts whether the project of modernity should be pursued. Section 4 proposes to frame degrowth as promotion of new vocabularies within a deliberative democratic framework. Finally, Section 5 summarizes our argument and draws conclusions.

2. The critique of modern civilization

This chapter provides an overview of important topoi of modernity critique and sketches the varying severity of the critiques by Heidegger, Illich, Marcuse, Zerzan and Habermas. In doing so, it demonstrates the affinity of the more radical critiques towards a dismissal of liberal democracy as opposed to the Habermasian critique that aims to correct rather than abandon the project of modernity. The topoi discussed in this chapter have also inspired the degrowth discourse – though not all authors are explicitly acknowledged as degrowth precursors: Our aim here is not to depict a genealogy of the degrowth discourse but to briefly review essential modernity critiques, some of which can be fruitfully linked to existing currents within the degrowth movement. Thus, throughout the rest of the paper, we will indicate some references from the degrowth discourse to these critics of modernity.[2]

2.1 Heidegger or "life in inauthenticity"

Heidegger's opus is notoriously ambivalent. In what follows, we review some of the more radical and dark strands; yet we will also point to the more relaxed aspects in his writing in Chapter 4.1. Heidegger generally delivers a stern assessment of the modern condition; he expresses an "anti-humanistic nostalgia for a world with higher meanings than our own" (Richardson 2012: 369). Following Heidegger, there are two basic ways of approaching nature – *Hervorkommenlassen* and *Herausfordern.* The first implies that man lets nature reveal itself. Literally, the German word means that humanity does *not* actively approach nature; rather, she lets nature come out of hiding by itself. Thus, it is a contemplative stance that waits for nature to show what it truly is. By implication, man cannot produce this kind of truth or control the process towards it; it is about meditative thinking and preserving an open attitude. Unfortunately (according to Heidegger), mankind has for a long time embarked on the second way, which refers to humanity's "challenging" of nature. By way of calculative thinking, man successfully attacks and conquers nature. The emergence of modern science is pivotal here, as scientific rationalism facilitated and established this paradigm of control and management (Cooper 2005).

The ubiquity of this frame of mind, and the inescapability of the ensuing processes, once set in motion, may be illustrated by man's paradoxical involvement with technology where positive feedback loops strengthen our entrapment: technology-driven problems can only be solved via technology (see García et al, 2017). But it was not through the use of technology that we created our modern predicament in the first place. Rather, technology is only an extension of the general challenging approach towards nature. The consequence of all this is

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[2] Certainly, other critiques of modernity have also been voiced (e.g. by Charles Taylor, Cornelius Castoriadis), but a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this section which first and foremost aims to illustrate the varying severity and the different foci within the literature criticizing modernity.

epistemic failure: "The question concerning technology is the question concerning the constellation in which revealing and concealing, in which the essential unfolding of truth comes to pass" (Heidegger 1977[1954]: 315). In other words, the challenging approach entails a concealment of the truth: our openness is lost and so is our access to being. As a result, we are confined to a life in *Un-Eigentlichkeit* (in-authentic life). Hence, the modern human condition is one of spiritual weakness and inauthenticity.

Heidegger's stance towards politics in the Weimar Republic mirrors this dire epistemic diagnosis. Political instability in Germany's first parliamentary democracy exacerbated an already widespread sense of uncertainty as the main signum of the societal "crisis of modernity" (Schwaabe 2005). Thus, Heidegger's longing for existential and spiritual renewal reflects a sentiment shared by many of his contemporaries (cf. Gumbrecht 1998). It also yields a desire for apolitical politics, for a revolution that jolts the political sphere out of the realm of merely interest-driven bargaining. In last consequence, Heidegger's critique of modernity gave way to staunch anti-liberalism. His ensuing involvement with Nazism, if only temporary, was ardent and not accidental – Heidegger's Nazism, of course, is a topic of its own, which we will not explore in more depth here.[3] For the purposes of this article, it suffices to retain the following point: the anti-modern mindset and vocabulary provide a fertile ground for a rejection of the open society, as the latter embodies modern life in all its facets. At the same time, the late Heidegger's "releasement" approach, which exhibits a more relaxed stance towards the modern world, has recently been invoked as a promising inspiration for degrowth's relationship towards technology (Heikkurinen 2016, see Section 4.1).

2.2 Illich or "the loss of autonomy"

In a way, Illich, who has become a popular source for degrowthists (e.g., Samerski 2017, Demaria et al. 2013), echoes and radicalizes previous critiques of the rationalizing process of modernity as described, for instance, by Max Weber. Modernity yields societal differentiation into separate subsystems, each of which follows its particular logic, and concomitant processes of rationalization and bureaucratization of each and every aspect of life. In Illich's view, this does not only imply a disenchantment of the world, but also leads to a loss of autonomy and actual damage for individuals. Specifically, Illich contends that the very institutions commonly interpreted as improving individual liberty and societal welfare actually rather work to the individuals' detriment: Healthcare, the legal system, schools and public transport transform autonomous individuals into patients, clients, students, and commuters. Thus, modernity replaces communality, mutuality and autonomy with ruthless systemic necessities. Illich radically questions the institutions of modern life for their compulsory, normalizing and role-enforcing effects. The prevalence of systemic pressures entails that rather than developing our own interests and capabilities, we are forced to fulfil specific preordained roles.

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[3] Heidegger's Nazism has been discussed anew after the publication of his notebooks revealed deeply rooted anti-Semitism. So probably there is more to his Nazism than just chance events and character flaws, as suggested by Rorty (1999: 192), who portrays Heidegger as a "cowardly hypocrite". In the end, however, Wheeler's (2011) judgment that we should *not* be "looking for evidence of Nazism in every twist and turn of the philosophical path he lays down" seems sensible.

Illich's book titles, such as "Deschooling Society", "Medical Nemesis" or "The Right to Useful Unemployment" attest to the severity of his critique. His judgment on the medical system, for instance, could hardly be more devastating: "The pain, dysfunction, disability, and anguish resulting from technical medical intervention rival the morbidity due to traffic and industrial accidents and even war-related activities, and make the impact of medicine one of the most rapidly spreading epidemics of our time" (Illich 1977: 17). Note that his critique does not concern curricula or the quality of healthcare – it concerns the corrosive effects of education, medicine, transport etc. *as such*. Consider the following claim based on Illich: "even in a degrowth-society technologies that are mainly cherished as public goods such as high-speed trains or healthcare will inevitably unfold their destructive effects" (Samerski 2017: X). The gist of Illich's diagnosis: in modern industrial societies, individuals have become enslaved by technological and systemic imperatives. Tools are no longer means, they are ends in themselves.

In consequence of his diagnosis, Illich promotes strong restrictions on technology and seems prepared to let go of professionalized and bureaucratized institutions such as the educational system altogether. That said, he does not advocate a complete rejection of technologies; he does, instead, favor a "convivial" approach to remedy the degenerating effects of modernization and rationalization. A convivial society is one "in which modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers" (Illich 1975: 12). Conviviality, then, implies that technology and tools are again confined to their prior role as means. Reversing the degenerating tendency of modernity, Illich argues, will "remain a pious dream unless the ideals of socialist justice prevail" (ibid.: 25). So reclaiming autonomy vis-á-vis technology is inherently linked to institutional inversion. Illich offers one possible example of such a transformation from an industrial towards a convivial society: "China has proved that a sudden inversion of a major institution is possible. It remains to be seen if this deprofessionalization can be sustained against the overweening ideology of unlimited progress" (ibid.: 18). And: "With the possible exception of China under Mao, no present government could restructure society along convivial lines" (ibid.: 29). Illich focuses on the "barefoot doctors" (laymen health workers) as an example of the desired de-professionalization.

Yet, on several levels, it is puzzling that Illich, who vigorously attacks modernity's tendency towards industrialization and whose philosophy of autonomy directly opposes any form of authoriatarianism should name Mao's China as a positive example: Mao's "Great Leap Forward", a campaign aiming at decentral forms of industrialization from 1958 to 1960, contributed to the great famine that probably caused 45 million deaths from 1958 to 1962 (Dikötter 2010); moreover, Mao's autocratic rule built on a personality cult and forced-labor camps. Illich published his book in 1973, so the defense that he might not have known the full extent of the disasters engendered by the Great Leap (e.g. Gomiero 2017) seems unconvincing. This is not a guilt-by-association argument against Illich. The question, rather, reads: how could someone striving for individual autonomy name Mao's China as a paradigm example?[4]

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[4] Note the parallel to Herman Daly's embracement of China's one-child policy as a solution to the population problem (1996: 120).

2.3 Marcuse or "voluntary servitude in the affluent society"

In the following, Marcuse illustrates the Marxist tradition of modernity critique: "The just response to modernity qua ideology is modernity qua critique; that is, the clear-eyed unmasking of inequities that reveals them to be products of social choices that could be otherwise" (Bennet 2006: 219). Overall, this tradition of ideology critique tends to reject the institutions of liberal democracy because they camouflage or legitimize the economic power relations and injustices that inherently characterize capitalist societies. Marcuse acknowledges "potential liberating blessings of technology and industrialization" which can only be realized after the dismantling of the institutions of repression and injustice (1967: 68). Thus, modernity is not rejected as a whole but rather its institutionalization in the form of liberal democracies with their "illusion of popular sovereignty".

Marcuse particularly criticizes humanity's voluntary self-alienation, the reduction to "one-dimensional" beings within consumer capitalism: individuals consent to their de-facto status as slaves in "the affluent society", confined to work and consumption in perpetual alternation. In the characteristically dialectic pattern of reasoning, Marcuse poses the dilemma as follows: "The transition from voluntary servitude […] to freedom presupposes the abolition of the institutions and mechanisms of repression. And the abolition of the institutions and mechanisms of repression already presupposes liberation from servitude, prevalence of the need for liberation" (1967: 178f.).

Furthermore, Marcuse contends that "preaching nonviolence on principle reproduces the existing institutionalized violence" (1967: 90). In other words, violence may be acceptable as a means to overthrow unjust capitalist institutions. Meanwhile, Marcuse has become a main inspiration for anti-capitalist protest movements of all kinds due to his promotion of the "Great Refusal" (see Lamas et al. 2017), that is, tactics of subversion and civil disobedience that may undermine institutional repression. Also, there is a strong indirect influence of Marcuse's thinking on the degrowth movement in that Marcuse stimulated and shaped Illich's perspective (Muraca and Neuber 2017).

2.4 Zerzan or "anarcho-primitivism"

There also exists a radical critique of modernity that has lost all hope and therefore all willingness to cure modernity. This perspective is anarcho-primitivism. In a sense, anarcho-primitivism takes the critiques voiced by Heidegger, Illich and Marcuse to their logical extreme; anarcho-primitivism is prepared to draw the radical consequence of their dire diagnoses – to wit, it advocates humanity's return to not only anti-modern but even to pre-civilization lifestyles. Hence, hunter-gatherers are portrayed as the ideal (and only sustainable) form of human life on earth. This may be exemplified by Zerzan's volume "Against Civilization", where he claims that "we have taken a monstrously wrong turn with symbolic culture and division of labor" and that "the logic of domestication, with its demand to control everything, now shows us the ruin of civilizations that ruins the rest" (Zerzan 1999: 221). Also, Zerzan approvingly includes an excerpt of "Industrial society and its future" by Theodore Kaczynski, the so-called "Unabomber", whose mail-bombing campaign targeted individuals singled out for their representing industrialized technology-based civilization, as opposed to

the aspired nature-centered anarchism. While rejecting Kaczynski's method, Zerzan promotes the same anti-modern perspective, taken to its extreme, primitivist end.

2.5 Habermas or "the unfinished project of modernity"

Each of the preceding authors highlighted particular failures of modernity and their overall diagnoses vary in severity. Nevertheless, they all dismiss the institutions of liberal democracy because they deem these institutions incapable of answering to (or even responsible for) the perceived ills that modernity has brought about.

An important route from a more moderate critique of modernity toward support for liberal democracy has been lit by Habermas (1984; 1987). From his theory of communicative action it follows that the "lifeworld" (i.e., where individuals communicate to create social solidarity and reproduce cultural norms) should be defended against "colonization" by systemic imperatives of strategic action and purely calculative thinking. At the same time, this counterattack against progressive rationalization of the lifeworld does emphatically *not* lead to a backward-looking glorification of pre-Enlightenment societies. To the contrary, the "unfinished project of modernity" deserves all support within the bounds of possibility:

> *In an extensively rationalized lifeworld, reification can be measured only against the conditions of communicative sociation, and not against the nostalgically loaded, frequently romanticized past of premodern forms of life (Habermas 1987: 342).*

Due to this reason, Habermas for example criticizes certain anti-modern trends of the Left-Green movement in Germany (1994[1980]).

Habermas considers the colonization of the lifeworld as an *excessive* form of an otherwise beneficial process that relieves society's members from risks and effort inherent in unmediated communication by shifting coordination towards "steering media" (e.g. money, power). Thus, rationalization as a main characteristic of modernity is not problematic per se; it can become so if it becomes excessive, "colonizing". The solution is clearly not abandonment of the "project of modernity", but rather its continuation through emphasis on communicative rationality as complement to instrumental rationality (see also Blau 2011).

3   The degrowth movement and the open society – no need for enemies with friends like these?

The degrowth spectrum is composed of various strands, some more radical, others more reformist; these strands might be subdivided in various ways. One account is provided by Ott (2012), who distinguishes four currents within the degrowth literature, three of which strive after reform of existing liberal democracies whereas the fourth aims at a fundamental institutional rupture. By comparison, Eversberg and Schmelzer (2017) in their empirical study among participants of the 2014 International Degrowth Conference delineate five currents with different foci of modernity critique. The more reformist strands aim to correct the hypertrophies of modernity (e.g. excessive rationalism, fixation on economic growth and technology), yet do not reject the existing institutions of liberal, capitalist democracies. For instance, Buch-Hansen (2014) argues that institutional diversity *within* capitalism should not be ne-

glected: from this perspective, a degrowth economy will most likely emerge as a hybrid of existing and new institutional elements.

By contrast, other strands issue a dire diagnosis of man's modern condition. In this section, we illustrate how *some* of these modernity critiques within the degrowth discourse may foster (often inadvertently) tendencies to undermine existing liberal democracies. For instance, Escobar (2015) explicitly combines a critique of liberal democracy with an overall critique of modernity. Consequently, he calls for "an entirely different logic of socio-natural life, indexed provisionally as non-liberal, non-capitalist, communal and relational", where the transition to this logic "will have to involve more radical questionings of growth, extractivism, and even modernity than ever before" (ibid: 460f.). In a similar way Trainer (2011: 71) asserts that "what is required is much greater social change than Western society has undergone in several hundred years". According to Eversberg and Schmelzer (2017), one important current within the degrowth movement are the "Sufficiency-oriented Critics of Civilization", who have given up on the project of modernity and long for a fundamental rebuilding of a spiritual, nature-based and more communal society: they articulate "a wholesale critique of civilization" (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2017: 22) and "advocate a return to the 'lifestyles of previous generations'"; half of this current believes that "man should return to his (and her) natural place in the world" (ibid.: 11).

Radical critiques against scientific rationalism and technology also tend to call for fundamental institutional rupture. Consider Gorz's (whose influence on the degrowth movement "cannot be stressed enough", Muraca 2013: 162) critique of technology-based capitalism. Gorz (1980) denounces the current socio-technical configurations as "technofascism" (ibid: 17) and, specifically in the energy sector, as "electrofascism" (ibid.: 106). Hence, he contends that current institutions need to be transcended, that is, radically transformed in order to free people from this oppression. More recently, Samerski (2017) argues – based on Illich's modernity critique – that the degrowth movement should "seek deliberate limits to manipulative technologies in general, including digital devices and professional services"; to this aim, the degrowth movement should explicitly stress the "need to downscale institutions".

Overall, the "anti-systemic potential of décroissance" (Muraca 2013) tends to dismiss the currently prevailing institutions of representative democracy as *democratic-in-name-only*: Deriu (2012: 556), for example, refers to existing liberal democracies as "the so-called democratic countries" where "citizens are in fact at the mercy of immense and impersonal powers", that is, corporations. This diagnosis is often accompanied by calls for more direct forms of democracy. In this vein, Asara et al. (2013) consider the quest for "real" and "true" democracy as a pivotal part of the degrowth project. Also, anarchism is sometimes proposed as the adequate "political imaginary" for the degrowth movement (e.g. Escobar 2015: 457). In sum, while different strands emphasize different aspects, they vary a common theme: failure of modernity coincides with a failure of institutions of liberal democracy.[5]

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[5] Certainly, not all exponents cited in this paragraph reject modernity as a whole. While some authors seem to dismiss the *ends* of the project of modernity, others only seem to doubt that modern liberal democracies provide the *means* towards a degrowth economy.

Given the co-evolution of technological and social structures, it seems straightforward that a strong overall disenchantment with modernity often aligns with a rejection of existing liberal democracies. To be sure, most of the radical critiques presumably aim to preserve and nurture core values of the open society such as free speech, freedom of religion and sexual orientation. Yet, we would like to point out a crucial risk here: the value foundation of the open society cannot be taken for granted – doing so might rather endanger these values. Indeed, it has been argued that modern mindsets, institutions and technologies are inextricably linked: "capitalism, psychological individuation and liberalism emerged together, remain interwoven and mutually dependent in complex ways, and depend absolutely on a continually expanding throughput of energy" (Quilley 2013: 263). By implication, it would be "highly questionable" whether liberal "social and institutional forms would survive the transition to a low-energy regime" (279).

This points to the risk of inadvertently sacrificing core values of the open society: eventually, authoritarianism might creep in through the back door. Note that argumentative patterns such as "true democracy", "real democracy" vs. "technofascism" and "so-called democratic countries" where people live "at the mercy of immense and impersonal powers" share a structural affinity (i.e. not necessarily substantial conceptual agreement) with some of the more radical modernity critiques sketched in Section 2 (e.g. Heidegger's juxtaposition of authenticity as opposed to modern life in-authenticity). The problem is that if existentialist vocabulary (truth, authenticity) enters the political domain, this jeopardizes political freedoms. Such vocabulary lends itself to engender disdain for all existing institutions and, in consequence, to justify violent means in order to overthrow democracies-in-name-only. In fact, the basic values of the open society have been explicitly questioned in the name of preventing ecological disaster (Heilbronner 1974, Ophuls 1977; see also the critical analysis of eco-authoritarianism in Shahar 2015). Finally, consider that someone as Illich, who clearly championed an anti-authoritarian position, nevertheless presented Maoist China as his only example of the aspired convivial approach. Thus, the spectre of authoritarianism should not be lightly dismissed.

Again, we presume that the core values of liberal democracy are cherished by a majority of degrowthists. We just point to the fundamental risk that the values of the open society be unintentionally abandoned. Imagine this scenario: disappointment with existing institutions leads to welcoming institutional breakdown in the hope of rebuilding a more just society out of the debris, whereupon "true democracy" fails to materialize and the values of liberal cosmopolitanism are sacrificed somewhere along the way.

4 Degrowth as transformation of the open society

How is it possible to reconcile a cosmopolitan, globally integrated, technologically progressive, science-based and liberal-democratic society which places an absolute value on the sanctity of individual human lives, with a more place-bound and communitarian society operating with long time horizons and within ecological limits? (Quilley 2017: 453).

In this chapter, we aim at providing a tentative answer to this question. To this goal, we first introduce our perspective on degrowth as promotion of new vocabularies. Second, we argue

that this perspective fits well with a deliberative account of democracy, which has important implications for degrowth.

4.1 Degrowth as promotion of a new vocabulary…

Drawing upon Rorty (1989), the degrowth movement can also be conceived as the attempt to promote a new vocabulary. Rorty's conceptual figure of a "liberal ironist" appeals to empathy and aims to reduce suffering via widening solidarity – to do this, the liberal ironist re-describes the world and creates new vocabularies. The search for authenticity and truth is then relegated to the personal sphere and viewed as an individual project of self-creation. From this perspective, the primary aim of the degrowth movement is to increase the number of people who use a specific "degrowth vocabulary".

As a matter of fact, a recent volume entitled "Degrowth. A vocabulary for a new era" (D'Alisa et al. 2015) promotes terms such as "commons", "work sharing", "environmental justice" or "buen vivir" and critically engages with others, such as "commodification". To be sure, this vocabulary is open to debate: notions such as "sufficiency" or "mindfulness", widely discussed in the sustainability fields (and also taken up in the degrowth-discourse), are not included. Also, some of the contributors may see degrowth as a radical project and perceive liberal democracies as failed. But the dictionary approach illustrates our general argument: vocabularies represent a means of re-describing and re-framing the world, and thus of introducing new ideas which, if taken up by the "audience", would contribute to the achievement of the goals of the degrowth movement.

The idea is not to present one's case with reference to "truths" that others fail to see or acknowledge. Rather, it is about telling stories that demonstrate the attractiveness of a sustainable lifestyle as compared to the "poverty" of unsustainable alternatives. Thus, such stories promote environmental values, including a stewardship attitude towards nature, or more community-centred and cooperative modes of economy, and show how currently prevailing lifestyles do not necessarily contribute to leading "good lives". Here, literature can play an important role, too (see also Bina et al. 2017). In fact, there are examples of popular books that have fostered a new, degrowth-compatible vocabulary. The classic example is, of course, "Limits to Growth" by Donella H. Meadows and others (1972), which sets out the general frame of mind. More recent examples include Jonathan Safran Foer's "Eating Animals" (2009), which has raised the awareness of animals suffering as a result of current consumption patterns, while also advertising the benefits of a more conscious diet, or Niko Paech's "Liberation from Excess" (2012), in which he argues that sufficiency and (limited) self-subsistence would not be a sacrifice but rather a "liberation". In a very similar fashion, Ericson et al. (2014) argue that mindfulness contributes to sustainability in that it enables people to escape the hedonic treadmill – note the essential proximity to meditative thinking as recommended by Heidegger. Yet mindfulness is a private matter and cannot be imposed upon individuals. It can, however, be promoted as part of a new vocabulary of sustainability and sufficiency.

Indeed, sufficiency could be a key concept here. The notion of sufficiency exhibits a thoroughly Heideggerian streak, as can be seen from the rather poetic closing paragraph of his essay "The Pathway" (1969[1948]: 71):

Everything speaks of renunciation unto the same. Renunciation does not take away, it gives. It bestows the inexhaustible power of the simple. The call makes us at home in the arrival of a distant origin.

This relaxed and, in effect, liberal stance may yield radical consequences nonetheless – to wit, if large numbers of people choose to live by it. Does this imply relegating change exclusively to the individual sphere? Only in the sense that institutional change needs individual consent, but not in the sense that all activity must start from the individual. Analogously, the "merit good" literature discusses how corrections of individual preferences can be justified by reflective preferences or retroactive consent, amongst other reasons (see the overview in Hoberg and Strunz 2018). Overall, the point is not to *a priori* rule out radical change but to ensure that the latter is democratically legitimated and driven by persuasion rather than imposed by force and violence. Hence, Gorz's "non-reformist reforms" (1964), that is, fundamental changes to the economic structure that follow human needs rather than needs of the economic system, may well be in line with the approach defended here.

In a similar vein, the modernity critique by Rosa (2016) focuses on the impoverished relations of man towards oneself, towards others and towards nature. In Rosa's terminology, processes of *social acceleration* lead to alienation (self-alienation and social alienation, both in spatial and temporal respects). This alienation does not imply an essentialist notion of moving away from some "true" nature of human being, but rather points to the neglected and diminished capabilities of responsive relating to the world. When we are alienated from the world, it appears silent and cold, devoid of meaning. Note that the processes of social acceleration that beget alienation are ambivalent – their negative effects notwithstanding, they are partly beneficial. In consequence, slowing down is no panacea; in some respects, such as internet access, acceleration is indeed beneficial. Hence, Rosa (2016) strikes a Heideggerian chord when he advocates "resonance" as a remedy: when we cultivate an attitude of openness towards others and towards nature (instead of a controlling, calculating stance), we create possibilities for meaningful relations of "resonance" that need to be re-invigorated for a meaningful life.

Thus, it is also possible to productively draw on parts of the stronger critiques of modernity, all the while pursuing the project of modernity without dismissing liberal democracy from the outset.

4.2 …within a deliberative account of democracy

Unfortunately, decision-making processes in existing representative democracies are often dominated by vested interests. This leads, among others, to calls for more direct democracy and a move away from representative democratic institutions. Here, the theory of deliberative democracy can be instructive,[6] as it shows that such more direct and participatory (and thus, so the assumption, less prone to being captured by vested interests) approaches are not purely antithetical to self-interest: "Including self-interest in the regulative ideal of deliberative de-

[6] The focus of the existing degrowth literature lies on participatory and economic democracy (e.g. Johanisova and Wolf 2012); however, we agree with Arias Maldonado (2000) that non-deliberative participatory democracy is unlikely to bring about sustainability, at least if the content of the latter is not to be pre-determined ideologically or technocratically. Furthermore, the issues we discuss here with reference to deliberative democracy are relevant for any attempt to democratically bring about a degrowth society.

mocracy embraces the diversity of human objectives as well as the diversity of human opinions" (Mansbridge et al. 2010: 73; see also Blau 2011). The same holds for power in implementing decisions reached in a deliberative way (Mansbridge et al. 2010: 83ff.). As argued by Sen (2009) and Dryzek (2013), even deliberation in the context of a Habermasian (1984) "ideal speech situation" need not necessarily lead to a consensus; there remains an irreducible "plurality of impartial reasons", as partisan actors are still part of deliberative accounts of democracy, and as such they are "best thought of as discursive representatives, representing particular conceptions of justice (possibly sustainability, efficiency, etc.)" (Dryzek 2013: 343). Participation and deliberation among free and equal participants may but need not necessarily lead to sustainability (Arias Maldonado 2000; 2007).

In consequence, concentrating on idealized, transcendental concepts such as perfect justice, true democracy etc., does not help us much in actually making the world less unjust (Sen 2009) – the deliberative, post-capitalist democracy may be a worthwhile regulative idea, but plurality of interests, power relations etc. cannot simply be "overcome".[7] Moreover, human fallibility is a fundamental reason for liberalism: that we never can be sure that we are "right", that we know the "truth" or what "authentic" life is (Mill 1859). Funke et al. (2017: 9), paraphrasing Marcuse, claim that in today's consumer societies "affluence and technological rationality replace freedom and authentic individuality" – but who decides what counts as "authentic individuality"? Acknowledging that we may be wrong implies liberalism and makes convincing others (e.g. by means of promoting vocabularies) the only legitimate mode of societal change.

In fact, the degrowth movement rhetorically embraces its own diversity – but this very diversity also entails different conceptions of what is to be considered as just, sustainable, true or authentic. Hence, liberalism should be a basic tenet of a degrowth movement if the spectre of authoritarianism re-entering through the back door is to be avoided: "some risk-aversion and skepticism against utopias[8] might be more helpful for the [degrowth] movement than radical chic" (Ott 2012: 580). One such utopia appears to be the notion of man returning to his (and her) natural place in the world (cf. Eversberg and Schmelzer 2017: 31). For if the preferred narratives of human civilization are purely negative (alienation, exploitation, technofascism, etc.), does this not imply a rather idealized conception of *état de nature*? How can such a perspective be justified, given the evidence that even hunter-gatherers significantly impacted on nature, to the point of megafaunal extinction (e.g. van der Kaars et al. 2017)? A similar issue concerns the popular notion of communal democracy (e.g. Escobar 2015): how can diversity within an open society (*sensu* Popper) be assured against the patterns of tight social control in local communities, against "local parochialism" (Sen 2009) or communal violence (Quilley 2013: 279; see also Diamond 2012: chap. 4)?

All this does not mean that a commitment to modernity and liberal democracy has to cling to the status quo in all its facets. On the contrary, commitment to political liberalism may well

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[7] Generally, as Ott (2012) points out, *theories of* democracy must be broad enough to be conceptually neutral with respect to specific political movements. By implication, "there can and should be no [degrowth]-theory of democracy" (Ott 2012: 576), but some theories of democracy address the shortcomings of existing liberal democracies in ways compatible with the degrowth agenda (see also Arias-Maldonado 2000).

[8] See also Agnes Heller's (2016) case against utopianism – and for the merit of dystopian thinking.

align with or even demand radical economic reconfigurations to improve distributional and ecological justice (Ferguson 2016: 612f.): "liberal democracies can and often must place limits upon the kind of preferences they realize, including preference for economic growth. For whilst growth might have once furthered a range of liberal objectives, it now threatens to undermine liberal institutions by destroying the conditions of socio-economic equality and ecological stability upon which they are predicated." Therefore, it is not liberal institutions that are problematic, it is forces that threaten these institutions or instrumentalize them; there are strong liberal reasons to tackle widespread injustice and other hypertrophies of modernity (Sen 2009; Habermas 1984, 1987; Popper 2011[1945]: 119). To be sure: these threats and the danger of instrumentalization are inherent features of liberal democracy of whatever type; they are the price for liberal freedom of the individual. The argument here is that they are a price worth paying.

An important corollary is that while the degrowth movement should have a vision of a post-growth society, the basic democratic tenets of individual freedom and legitimacy of collective institutions require that this vision be only an orientation for a societal debate; in other words, it must be allowed that the democratic processes lead to an institutional arrangement that differs from the original degrowth vision (cf. Arias-Maldonado 2000). This stresses the relevance and importance of the Rortian (1989) "liberal hope" that (deliberative) democratic processes will lead to the adoption of a degrowth vocabulary and, thus, to a transition towards sustainability. In other (Rorty's) words, a deliberative approach consists in replacing "blows by words" or, in Habermas's terms, in focusing on communicative reason in trying to reach *a* (not *the*) sustainable, post-growth world (Niżnik and Sanders 1996: 28).

In sum, the degrowth movement may present its case in a liberal framing, advertising the multiple positive effects of personal and institutional change. Recent discussions on how to improve the popularity and attractiveness of degrowth vocabulary (e.g. Drews and Antal 2016) are very welcome in this respect. Certainly, the process of activating or constructing the right frames, that is the unconscious structures guiding our thinking, is long and arduous (Lakoff 2010): propagating new vocabulary does not quickly deliver transformative change because the existing frames may have become institutionally reified, continuously defended by vested interests. So far, the degrowth agenda does not enjoy any consent among the broader population (Buch-Hansen 2018). This, however, gives all the more reason for the degrowth movement to popularize vocabularies that can legitimate institutional change.

5 Conclusion

The degrowth movement has developed out of a critique of modernity's hypertrophies, and rightly so. Modernity critiques often exhibit an ambivalent stance – some aspects of modernity are to be kept, others to be rejected; as Bennet (2006: 222) puts it, main nodes of modernity critique are still "infused with the *hope* that the world is susceptible to critical reasoning" (italics in the original). Nonetheless, the radical currents of modernity critique within the degrowth movement tend to dismiss the institutions of liberal, capitalist democracies as failed, corrupted and democracy-in-name-only.

Against this background, our main argument reads that the degrowth movement should avoid conflating a critique of modernity with a rejection of liberal democracy and the values of the open society. Some radical strands in the degrowth movement unintentionally endanger these values by pushing vocabularies of personal self-creation, truth and authenticity into the public discourse, potentially fostering illiberal trends. This is problematic because it takes the achievements of the open society for granted. Therefore, we propose to conceive of degrowth as a liberal project (including the option of radical change via reform, cf. Gorz 1964); drawing upon Rorty's concept of "irony and liberal hope" and Sen's and Habermas' deliberative understanding of democracy, we showed that not only is this approach compatible with the open society, "not giv[ing] lightly up hope that by such means as argument and careful observation, people may reach some kind of agreement on many problems of importance; and that, even where their demands and their interests clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals" (Popper 2011[1945]: 431); it also lays out a clear road towards realization, since by promoting new vocabularies majorities for the degrowth project can be created. These majorities will not be created quickly – promotion of vocabularies is a slow process. Still the "baby" (i.e. core values of the open society) should not be thrown out with the "bathwater" (i.e. modernity's hypertrophies such as excessive instrumental rationalism).

While the proposed liberal approach to degrowth explicitly follows Habermas' call to carry on the "unfinished project of modernity", it might also productively draw on some aspects of the other modernity critiques that have been exemplarily presented in this paper. Illich's convivial approach towards social and technological tools has already been widely received in the degrowth literature (e.g. Deriu 2015, Samerski 2017). Heidegger's ethos of releasement seems to have been introduced into the degrowth literature only very recently (Heikkurinen 2016); there is clearly more to be found in Heidegger's writings for a liberal approach to self-sufficient degrowth. So even though Illich, Heidegger and Marcuse may have strayed from the liberal democratic path, this does not imply that their experiences and writings should be pushed aside. On the contrary, we may learn from their aberrations and thus avoid repeating their mistakes. Specifically, one lesson might be to avoid existentialist vocabularies (e.g. authenticity, truth) in the political domain and to conceive of the refusal to conform with systemic pressures primarily as a personal virtue. Certainly, other modernity critiques not addressed in this paper could also inform a liberal approach to degrowth. Only the most radical critiques of modernity, such as Zerzan's primitivist group in the US, can hardly be reconciled with any enlightened account of degrowth (Demaria et al. 2013: 209).

We agree with Kallis et al. (2012:178) that the revolutionary strand within the degrowth movement may play an important strategic role, too:

> *What about labour and women rights, the 40 hours' workweek, social security or free healthcare? Weren't these unthinkable reforms at the time that compromised the profits of powerful vested interests? […] In many cases such radical agendas have come through electoral and social pressure […] it takes radical agendas to take power in order to bring about reformist policies.*

In a sense, this paper fosters and sharpens this message: the degrowth movement rightly aims to correct the hypertrophies of modernity but it should be more explicit about i) which of lib-

eral democracy's and, more generally, modernity's basic tenets it intends to keep and ii) how this is to be ensured.

An obvious pragmatic question for the politics of degrowth reads: do liberal democracies allow for such reforms or has the open society been fully corrupted? Against the latter view, let us point out some examples: in 2015, German chancellor Angela Merkel refused to join in the fear-mongering over the refugee flow to Europe and defended a more welcoming refugee policy against harsh critics both among her conservative party colleagues and among fellow leaders in the EU. In 2016, the self-proclaimed "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders won 43% of the popular vote in the US Democrats' primaries. Since 2000, twenty-seven countries have enacted same-sex marriage laws and a growing number of countries are considering whether to follow.[9] Needless to say, not all is well; but this does not invalidate the general point that there always exist alternatives. The degrowth movement should not succumb to the there-is-no-alternative fallacy when evaluating the possibility space of actions – even within liberal democracies (Buch-Hansen 2014). This seems all the more important because degrowth's grassroots origins notwithstanding, "the majority of degrowth proposals […] follow a top-down approach" in that they "require direct control by governments […], which suggests the need for a high level of state intervention to pursue a degrowth transition" (Cosme et al. 2017: 149). Eventually, the spectre of authoritarianism is often quite clear to see for those want to see it. Consider that already in 1918, the socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxembourg condemned the Bolsheviks' dissolution of the Russian Constituent Assembly in Saint Petersburg – her clear-sighted judgement should alert all those who casually dismiss currently existing liberal democracies as failed:[10]

> *To be sure, every democratic institution has its limits and shortcomings, things which it doubtless shares with all other human institutions. But the remedy which Trotsky and Lenin have found, the elimination of democracy as such, is worse than the disease it is supposed to cure; for it stops up the very living source from which alone can come correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammeled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people.*

Acknowledgements

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[9] http://www.pewforum.org/2017/08/08/gay-marriage-around-the-world-2013/
[10] https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch04.htm.

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