

# Economic De-Growth: A Theoretical and Critical Review

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*Received: 8 April 2021 Accepted: 5 May 2021 Published: 15 May 2021*

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to present a bibliographical review on the theme of de-growth, firstly discussing the emergence, the main foundations and the proposals of this theoretical conception. Subsequently, the most relevant critical arguments to this approach are exposed, both in relation to its internal consistency and the possibility of a de-growth program being compatible with a capitalist economy. The result of this review points to the need to advance in the construction of a more robust theoretical formulation on de-growth, considering the main criticisms presented in recent years.

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*Index terms—*

## 1 Introduction

The Industrial Revolution initiated in the 18th century marks the dawn of capitalism as the dominant mode of production. Since then, the world has seen an accelerated growth in productivity, innovation and production. The 20th century was marked by the dispute between two distinct economic systems, capitalism and socialism. The engine of both was the same: increased productivity (productivism) and constant economic growth. The dispute ended in 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Capitalism won the dispute for hegemony and now, more than ever, consumerism promoted by advertising, credit and programmed obsolescence is the great engine of economic growth.

But could economic growth be infinite? In a finite world, growth could not take place indefinitely. This was the conclusion of Georgescu-Roegen in his book *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, published in 1971. The theme, however, only gained visibility in 1972, after the release of a report, commissioned by the Club of Rome, entitled *The Limits to Growth*. In it, the Romanian economist shows that the planet is a closed system and that the economy is a subsystem of the ecosystem. Throughout production processes, we transform low-entropy energy into high-entropy energy. This implies that part of the energy and matter resulting from production can no longer be used. Thus, the production process is irreversible and growth cannot be infinite.

Georgescu is considered the founder of ecological economics and inspiration for the de-growth movement. The report, through computational models, presented catastrophic predictions about the environment, if the production and consumption levels of that period were maintained.

Among the various debates that followed, the idea of sustainable development, which defended the possibility of reconciling economic development with environmental preservation, gained prominence, especially from 1987 onwards, with the publication of the Brundtland Report by the World Commission on Environment and Development. The conflict between economic growth and environmental preservation seemed to be resolved with the proposals for sustainable development.

The concept of sustainable development has become increasingly dispersed and trivialized, used by governments, international agencies and even by the most predatory companies (LENA, 2012). It is from the diffusion of this concept that his biggest criticism arises: is development (understood by economic growth) really sustainable? Its critics will say that growth and sustainability are paradoxical, that is, it is not possible to continue growing without worsening the environmental situation.

It is in the midst of this discussion that the movement in favor of de-growth was born. According to ?ist (2012), the idea arose in 2002 at a colloquium in Paris, whose theme was "undoing development, remaking the world". Since then, the movement in favor of de-growth has gained more visibility and has had a great rise, although it remains a minority. De-growth theorists draw attention to the socioenvironmental problems caused

## 4 (I). REASSESS: CHANGING SOCIETY'S VALUES TO FACE CURRENT CHALLENGES;

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47 by the current "growth society". The transfiguration of this society into a "degrowth society", with values different  
48 from the current one, would be the solution to reduce social inequalities and avoid an environmental collapse.

49 From this discussion on de-growth, this article sought to present the historical perspective of the concept  
50 (Introduction); expose what de-growth is, as well as its main arguments, explaining the internal structure of  
51 this formulation and its most relevant proposals (section 1); and highlight the fundamental criticisms about  
52 the internal consistency and compatibility of proposals for the realization of a "degrowth society" in relation to  
53 capitalism (section 2). Finally, considerations about the need to advance in the construction of a more robust  
54 concept of de-growth and its real intentions are presented.

## 55 2 I.

### 56 3 De-Growth: A Historical and Theoretical Review

57 The concept of de-growth is broad, therefore, difficult to be explained in a few words. In fact, according to  
58 Latouche (2012), de-growth is not a concept in itself, nor is it the opposite of growth. Degrowth is a kind of  
59 political slogan, which emphasizes the importance of abandoning the search for growth as the ultimate goal 4 The  
60 idea of de-growth recognizes that there are limits to the use of natural resources. Furthermore, its advocates are  
61 skeptical about the possibility of technology being able to universalize the consumption pattern of rich countries.  
62 If there are not enough resources for everyone to maintain a standard of living in the style of developed countries  
63 and no technology capable of doing it, then would the solution be a reduction in the world population? This  
64 reasoning has led many to accuse degrowth of being Malthusian. Bayon et al. (2011) refute this accusation by  
65 stating that the uncontrolled population increase is indeed a problem, but its regulation should be democratic,  
66 mainly through people's awareness and not in the way Malthus proposed it.

67 . In other words, de-growth is not an alternative, but a set of alternatives that challenge the society whose  
68 main objective is growth as an end in itself. This society is neither sustainable nor desirable.

69 De-growth gathers those who consider it essential to reduce the physical dimension of the economic system  
70 and can be defined in different ways, given the different currents of thought and approaches that use it to criticize  
71 the pattern of development based on economic growth. It can also be seen as a concept whose purpose is to break  
72 the consensus of the consumerist imagination, denouncing the false freedom and happiness that are sold through  
73 advertising. In short, what de-growth has in common in these different approaches is the idea of "consuming less  
74 to live better". (BAYON, FLIPO, SCHNEIDER, 2011). 5 Latouche (2009) states that de-growth society project  
75 is the only option capable of avoiding an ecological and human catastrophe. This catastrophe will happen, if  
76 we don't change in time, due to the incessant search for growth. To change the current society the main target  
77 would then be consumerism. But, on the contrary, current society's efforts are aimed at stimulating consumption.  
78 Among these, the main ones are credit and advertising. Advertising creates desires in consumers and encourages  
79 them to renew their manufactured goods, even if they are still in perfect conditions of use. On the other hand,  
80 credit is what allows the consumer's desires to be satisfied, even if their income is already compromised, that is,  
81 credit allows the expansion of consumption capacity.

82 Both advertising, which encourages insatiability for industrialized products, and programmed obsolescence,  
83 whose mechanisms lead to a compulsory expansion in consumption, create the disposable culture. Obsolescence  
84 provides less longevity for so-called durable goods, as well as promoting the creation of components, software and  
85 parts that are incompatible between different models and different brands, with a single objective: to increase  
86 (or minimally maintain) the level of consumption. 6 According to Latouche (2009) de-growth is a concrete and  
87 revolutionary utopia. The consequences, however, are, on the one hand, an increase in the use of natural resources  
88 and, on the other, an increase in the amount of pollutants and waste arising from both the production of new  
89 goods and disposal of the old ones.

## 90 4 (i). Reassess: changing society's values to face current 91 challenges;

92 Its concrete proposals are outlined in the "vicious circle" of serene de-growth, represented by eight interdependent  
93 changes, namely:

94 (ii). Re-conceptualize: changing values leads to another way of apprehending reality; (iii). Restructuring:  
95 adapting the productive apparatus and social relations in terms of changing values; (iv). Redistribute:  
96 distributing wealth and to granting access to natural heritage; (v). Relocate: producing locally, as far as possible,  
97 products intended to meet the needs of the population; (vi). Reduce: reducing the impact on the biosphere of our  
98 ways of consuming and producing, that is, reducing our ecological footprint; (vii). Reuse: reducing programmed  
99 obsolescence; (viii). Recycle: recycling what cannot be directly reused.

100 However, as Latouche (2009) argues, degrowth does not have a robust political program and needs great  
101 support from the population to: reduce the ecological footprint and energy waste, reduce inequalities, transform  
102 productivity gains into time reduction and for the application of eco-fees.

103 Another approach that, similarly to the view on de-growth, derives from the discussion about the limits of  
104 economic growth as a fundamental engine of contemporary capitalist society, is the one that deals with the  
105 so-called steady state economy. Although it has already been addressed by classical economists such as Adam

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106 Smith and John Stuart Mill, the discussion of steady-state economics is brought to the fore more recently by the  
107 ecological economist Herman E. Daly. The latter, as a disciple of one of the precursors of the de-growth vision  
108 (Georgescu-Roegen), believes that the indiscriminate expansion of the economic product has serious limits in  
109 terms of generating non-negligible ecosystem impacts. However, unlike Georgescu, Daly is less skeptical about  
110 the phenomenon of growth. In this sense, instead of economic activity presenting itself as necessarily declining  
111 over time, in the steady state it would be defined as: constant stocks of physical wealth (arti-facts) and a constant  
112 population, each maintained at some chosen, desirable level by a low rate of throughput -i.e., by low birth rates  
113 equal to low death rates and by low physical production rates equal to low physical depreciation rates, so that  
114 longevity of people and durability of physical stocks are high. (DALY, 1974, pg. 15). Thus, according to Cechin  
115 and Veiga (2010), the steady state could be interpreted as one in which the use of natural resources would be  
116 just enough to reproduce a constant amount of capital and population. Therefore, the improvements would no  
117 longer occur in quantitative terms, but in qualitative terms.

118 Qualitative changes would be represented by technological advances that would increase the incorporation of  
119 value into production, even though the amount of inputs used remains constant (TRAINER, 2016). Thus, "the  
120 value of total production may still increase without growth in physical throughput -as a result of qualitative  
121 development. Investment in quality improvement may yield a value increase out of which interest could be paid."  
122 ??Daly, 2008 ??pud Trainer, 2016).

123 This technological improvement would mean an increase in efficiency in the use of physical and biological  
124 resources, so that the product growth (in qualitative terms) becomes compatible with ecological sustainability.  
125 This movement of separation of economic growth from the growth in the use of production inputs, made possible  
126 by the advance of the technique, is called decoupling. While absolute decoupling would be the scenario in which  
127 output grows and the incorporation of inputs remains constant or decreases, relative decoupling would be related  
128 to the less than proportional growth of the need for inputs in relation to the output growth rate. (TRAINER,  
129 2016). Development would, therefore, be achieved in the steady state if there were effectively a movement of  
130 distancing output growth in relation to the use of inputs.

131 Furthermore, as stated by Cechin and Veiga (2010), the steady state concept is strongly based on the idea that,  
132 from a given moment, the economic growth process starts to present high costs that compromise the well-being  
133 of future generations, which it would require a maintenance of the capital stock and the population in order to  
134 minimize the ecosystem impacts and the use of natural resources.

135 Thus, it is possible to highlight the divergences and congruences of this view in relation to the concept of de-  
136 growth. First, it is noteworthy that the latter is more related to the French-speaking world, while the steady state  
137 perspective is more linked to North American thought. Furthermore, while the de-growth proposal advocates for  
138 decreasing levels of consumption, especially in developed countries, the steady state view proposes a stabilization  
139 of population and per capita consumption, which implies the maintenance of capital stocks, the supply of labor  
140 and the use of resources for economic production. (MARTINEZ-ALIER et al., 2010). This apparent incongruity,  
141 however, overshadows some points of compatibility between these two views. Authors such as Martínez-Alier  
142 (2010) and Kerschner (2010) indicate that these perspectives can be seen as compatible and complementary.  
143 Compatibility could be found, first, if the steady state situation is considered as the final stage of a degrowth  
144 process, which cannot be extended indefinitely. In this sense, de-growth should not be treated as the end of the  
145 process, but as a path by advanced countries to reach a situation of dynamic equilibrium similar to that of a  
146 steady state. Under these circumstances, with the decline of output and population in developed countries, a  
147 steady state situation could arise.

148 Finally, as in de-growth, the steady state perspective believes that it can adjust to the way capitalism works,  
149 which, in other words, would indicate the non-existence of the need to overcome the fundamental structures of this  
150 mode of production. In summary, Daly talks about this supposed compatibility: "growth is seen to be entirely  
151 subjective, optional, not built in capitalist economies. So it can be dispensed with, exorcised, and capitalism can  
152 carry on in something like "stasis." (SMITH, 2010).

153 However, even having stood out in the academic and political scenarios of the world, both the vision of de-  
154 growth and the steady-state economy are targets of various types of criticism, which question the theoretical  
155 consistency of these approaches and, mainly, their compatibility in relation to the functioning of the capitalist  
156 system. In the next topic the most relevant criticisms of these approaches are explained.

## 157 5 II. Critical Perspectives on De-Growth

158 As stated above, the conception of de-growth is criticized in several aspects. The first type of criticism to be  
159 highlighted is the one that calls into question the internal foundations and the structuring of the very concept  
160 of de-growth. On the inconsistencies and limits of this formulation, the work of Schwartzman (2012) is first  
161 evidenced. For this author, even though the works on the theme of de-growth present an important discussion  
162 about the social and environmental limits of economic growth, the arguments presented are not capable of offering  
163 a political agenda capable of confronting the economic and ecological crisis in a forceful way. The main problems  
164 of this approach would be, therefore, the failure to analyze the qualitative aspects of economic growth and the  
165 material requirements to provide high levels of quality of life. Furthermore, another problem that derives from  
166 this view is the emphasis on the local economy without recognizing the urgency of developing a transnational  
167 concept and solution.

## 5 II. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DE-GROWTH

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168 With regard to the consideration of qualitative and quantitative aspects of growth, Schwartzman (2012) states  
169 that proponents of de-growth fail to treat output growth as something homogeneous. For him, the fundamental  
170 question must be raised about what type of growth is being talked about and what types of impacts each type of  
171 growth would have on ecological and health aspects. In his words, it is necessary to question, for example, what  
172 type of growth would be sustainable in terms of the preservation of biodiversity and what type of production  
173 would be most useful for increasing the well-being of humanity.

174 On the other hand, the author emphasizes that the de-growth program would be available only to a small  
175 minority of the world population, namely, the countries of the North. At best, the de-growth program would  
176 be useful to spur the emergence of local energy and food cooperatives, which would represent the resurgence of  
177 the bankrupt hippy community of the 1960s. What there should be, in this author's view, is a transnational  
178 ecosocialist movement capable of facing the agents that prevent the fight against the elements that threaten the  
179 ecosystem balance. (Schwartzman, 2012).

180 Another criticism made by this author is that the formulators of the degrowth concept point out the failures  
181 and limits of the capitalist mode of production without, however, presenting anything that could replace it. The  
182 most that is done is to point out the need to create other forms of economic and social organization more suited  
183 to the new conditions. (Schwartzman, 2012).

184 Foster (2011) points out that even more problematic is the view of de-growth in underdeveloped countries. This  
185 author explains Latouche's (2006) argument that the degrowth program should be applied to both advanced  
186 and underdeveloped countries, so that the latter cease to pursue the strict objective of economic growth in time.  
187 According to Latouche himself, "southern countries need to escape their economic and cultural dependence on the  
188 North and rediscover their own histories-interrupted by colonialism, development and globalization-to establish  
189 distinct indigenous cultural identities." (LATOUCHE, 2006 (Foster, 2011)).

190 Also according to Foster (2011), for Herman Daly it would be a waste of time and a moral delay to advocate  
191 steady state (and also de-growth) economic programs for underdeveloped countries before the overdeveloped  
192 nations have at least started to decrease their growth rate population and consumption growth rate. The starting  
193 point for this type of procedure should therefore be the developed countries.

194 Finally, Bergh and Kallis (2012) highlight that another criticism of the de-growth view would be that related  
195 to the fact that there would not be a single and consistent measurement to measure the scale of the economy,  
196 making the idea of resizing become very vague. Thus, when talking about de-growth, one can be talking about  
197 product, consumption or hours worked. The exponents of this view, however, do not believe that the inexistence  
198 of a single parameter would be a fundamental obstacle.

199 Having presented the criticisms about the foundations and the concept of de-growth, we begin to explain the  
200 questions about the compatibility between de-growth and the capitalist mode of production. In other words,  
201 would it be possible to implement a program of this nature and still preserve the structuring pillars of a market  
202 economy?

203 Marx, in his book *The Capital*, exposes the essence of a capitalist economy through the sphere of circulation  
204 of capital:  $D-M-D'$ , where the final amount of money is greater than the initial amount. The implication of this  
205 concept is that capital to be capital it will always seek its accumulation, that is, it will always increase its volume.  
206 Thus, the capitalist will reinvest part of his profits to produce new products and obtain new profits. The process  
207 is endless.

208 In order for this process of constant reinversion of profits to occur and, consequently, of constant increase  
209 in the volume of global capital, it is necessary that consumption also increase, as this is what will enable  
210 the transformation of the commodity into capital plus profit. Therefore, there are the following relationships:  
211 consumption growth is a fundamental part of maintaining capital accumulation; capital accumulation is the  
212 basis of the capitalist economic system; therefore, the continuous increase in consumption is fundamental for  
213 the maintenance of capitalism; finally, as the systematic increase in consumption (on a world level) means an  
214 increase in Volume XXI Issue V Version I 52 ( E ) economic growth, then economic growth, by providing the  
215 accumulation of capital, is the mainstay of the capitalist economy.

216 For Fotopoulos (2007), the degrowth project represents a dialectical junction between anti-systemic and  
217 reformist movements, which results in the construction of a critical view, which does not advocate the abolition of  
218 the market economy system, but which proposes to reduce its scope. According to Latouche (2007) Drastically  
219 reducing environmental damage does mean losing the monetary value in the material goods. But it does not  
220 necessarily mean ceasing to create value through nonmaterial products. In part, this could keep their market  
221 forms. Though the market and profit can still be incentives, the system must no longer revolve around them.  
222 (LATOUCHE, 2007 (Fotopoulos, 2007)).

223 However, according to Fotopoulos (2007), although the proponents of this view believe in the compatibility  
224 between de-growth and the perpetuation of capitalism, it should be remembered that modern society is strongly  
225 based on maximizing economic growth for its reproduction. This is basically based on two fundamental elements,  
226 namely, production and consumption.

227 First, with regard to production, it seems clear that the dynamics of a market economy imply a constant  
228 expansion of production so that profits are maximized. It would be contradictory, therefore, to consider a market  
229 economy based on non-growth, not only because there would be great resistance from transnational companies,  
230 which would move from countries that adopt this type of program, but also because of the simple fact that

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231 the economy market is incompatible with zero growth. It does not mean, however, that there could not be a  
232 zero-growth society. What is meant is that, given the existence of the capitalist mode of production, it would be  
233 impossible to keep it running without one of its main engines, economic growth. ??Fotopoulos, 2007).

234 On the other hand, when consumption is considered, it is clear that its decrease is extremely undesirable, as it  
235 would represent a necessary counterpart for carrying out long and stressful working hours. A forced reduction in  
236 consumption would represent for society, therefore, a deprivation in relation to one of the elements that justifies  
237 the perpetuation of the market society, namely, consumerism. ??Fotopoulos, 2007).

238 For this author, the incompatibility between degrowth and capitalism would become clear from the historical  
239 analysis and investigation of the system dynamics. If there is no market economy system that has not been based  
240 on maximizing economic growth, then it must be assumed that de-growth could not be constituted as a mere  
241 change in the values of society and that, moreover, it could not coexist with a market system.

242 Fotopoulos (2007) also presents the proposals of the de-growth program and what would be its impacts within  
243 a capitalist system. Starting with the proposal to bring material production back to the levels of the 1960s and  
244 1970s, which would lead to a dramatic increase in unemployment and poverty among the most vulnerable social  
245 groups. 8 8 Knowing that the volume of capital has multiplied several times since the 1970s, then the question  
246 to be asked is: with such a large reduction in production, what would happen to this volume of capital? A part  
247 of it would not find alternatives to continue its accumulation process, resulting in acute economic crises.

248 Second, the internalization of transport costs, which would transform private and air transport modes into  
249 luxury goods accessible only to the wealthier classes. Third, the return to small-scale agricultural production,  
250 which would increase food prices, once again affecting the poorest groups. Finally, reducing energy waste by  
251 three quarters through the use of a tax system, which could reduce material and energy costs, but at the same  
252 time increase material consumption.

253 As Trainer (2010) points out, if effective efforts were made to combat the negative effects of growth, the  
254 required action should be so drastic and widespread, that a new type of system, other than the market, would  
255 emerge. On the other hand, the proposals developed by the advocates of de-growth would cause a dramatic  
256 reduction in business, which, apart from being intolerable on the part of large companies, would not be achieved  
257 without major state regulation.

258 Another important consequence of a zerogrowth economy, according to Trainer (2010), refers to the non-  
259 existence of interest payments. In the absence of this element, the existence of only a fixed and stable amount of  
260 capital would be necessary, so that the investment would be put into operation just to face the depreciation.

261 In this scenario, the government would be incapable of implementing monetary policy, having to stimulate  
262 the economy through indiscriminate and coercive decisions, approaching a type of planned control. Furthermore,  
263 there would be no need for the creation of money, as a constant amount would be sufficient to carry out the  
264 purchase and sale transactions. In this way, the banking market would be dramatically transformed, as they  
265 would be unable to create new currency. ??Trainer, 2010).

266 Finally, given that in the current economic system, growth is essential to prevent unemployment from growing,  
267 considering the constant technological advances, in a zero-growth economy a constant amount of product would  
268 only be achieved at the expense of a reduction in the workforce. ??Trainer, 2010).

269 Trainer ??2010, pg.11) summarizes what then would be the nature of the capitalist system and how it is  
270 fundamentally based on the logic of growth and accumulation: "Capitalism is by definition about growth. Its  
271 essential characteristic is the investment of capital in order to make as much profit as possible, to re-invest next  
272 year in order to make as much profit as possible... in a never ending spiral of capital accumulation".

273 The key to the incompatibility between degrowth and capitalism would therefore lie in the fact that growth  
274 would be an inescapable consequence of the market system, as one enters into it with the intention of maximizing,  
275 selling at the highest price, buying at the lowest, investing in sectors in that the rates of return are more attractive,  
276 in other words, seeking the highest possible valuation. In this way, according to Trainer (2010), in the market  
277 there is either growth or death, since all the others who participate in it use this same logic.

## 278 6 III.

## 279 7 Concluding Remarks

280 Considering the recent nature of the concept of de-growth, the purpose of this article was to carry out a literature  
281 review, trying to explain the fundamental structure and the main proposals of the degrowth program, in addition  
282 to presenting the most relevant critical arguments in relation to this approach.

283 What stands out, first, is the broad character of the concept (or political slogan) of degrowth, which intends  
284 to lessen the importance and indispensability of the objective of growth in contemporary capitalist society. The  
285 proposal would therefore be to resize the economic system in order to make it "fit" within the limits set by  
286 the terrestrial ecosystem. This proposal, however, due to its comprehensive and abstract nature, ends up being  
287 the target of several criticisms regarding its own internal consistency -Impossibility of analyzing the qualitative  
288 aspects of growth, the regional and fragmented character of the analysis and the generic application of the  
289 program for advanced countries and underdeveloped -and, mainly, regarding the possibility of implementing this  
290 proposed type in a system whose fundamental gear would be accumulation or economic growth.

291 In summary, the most relevant critical arguments seem to indicate a contradiction in the formulation of the

292 de-growth concept, since: i) the reduction in growth, in a growing economy, would have perverse effects; ii)  
293 therefore, de-growth should only be considered in a de-growth society; iii) however, the concrete measures of  
294 de-growth end up generating a reduction in growth, causing the negative effects warned by the author, since  
295 today's society is a society of consumption, of growth.

296 Thus, the need to advance in the construction of the idea of de-growth seems evident, strengthening the internal  
297 structure of this conception and evaluating the effectiveness of implementing such a program in a capitalist  
298 production system.

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<sup>1</sup>It is, then, a discussion that only deepened in the recent period (although its roots is in the 1970s). The term de-growth "did not appear in any French dictionary of social sciences until 2006, although it was possible to find some entries for its correlates: "zero growth", "sustainable development" and, of course, "steady state". (LATOUCHE, 2012, p. 45).

<sup>2</sup>The central point of degrowth is found in the critique of development, specifically through the "inversion of perspective with which the phenomenon of poverty and exclusion is read". (BONAIUTI, 2012, p.88).<sup>5</sup> Latouche (2009) does not see overcrowding as the problem. The question is: knowing how to share resources in an equitable and ethical way.

<sup>3</sup>According to Löwy (2009), the problem is not excessive consumption by the population (as ecologists argue), nor is the solution a general reduction in consumption, especially in more developed countries. The problem is the way in which current consumption takes place, based on waste, ostentation, obsession with accumulation and mercantile alienation. The solution, therefore, is to end consumption based on these conditions.<sup>7</sup> "The degrowth project is therefore a utopia, that is, a source of hope and dream. However, far from taking refuge in the unreal, it tries to explore the objective possibilities of its application. Hence the term "concrete utopia". (LATOUCHE, 2009, p.40).

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