

Degrowth and Public Choice: Navigating Private Interests and Power Dynamics for a Sustainable Future

Büyümeme ve Kamu Tercihi: Sürdürülebilir Bir Gelecek İçin Kişisel Çıkarları ve Güç Dinamiklerini Yönlendirmek

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Abstract

This article examines degrowth through the lens of public choice theory. Since degrowth is both a political and economic concept, public choice provides a useful framework for analyzing its various dimensions. Degrowth challenges the dominant ideology of constant economic expansion, promoting a deliberate reduction in resource consumption to restore ecological balance, reduce inequality, and improve collective well-being. However, the article emphasizes the difficulties of implementing degrowth policies, pointing to the self-interested motivations of key social actors: voters, politicians, and bureaucrats. Voters often prioritize their own utility when choosing a party or policy, while politicians focus on reelection and bureaucrats aim to expand their department's budget. These individual interests often conflict with the broader goals of degrowth, making the transition to a more sustainable and equitable society difficult. The article critically analyzes degrowth from a public choice perspective, underscoring the systemic obstacles posed by inherent self-interest. It also argues that since government outcomes are often the result of the collective actions of self-interested individuals, the public choice perspective has the potential to provide useful insights for degrowthers.

Keywords: Degrowth, Self-interest, Sustainability, Public Choice.

Öz

Bu makale, büyümeyi kamu tercihi perspektifinden incelemektedir. Büyümeme hem politik hem de ekonomik bir kavram olduğundan, kamu tercihi, büyümemenin çeşitli boyutlarını analiz etmek için yararlı bir çerçeve sunar. Büyümeme, ekolojik dengeyi sağlamak, eşitsizliği azaltmak ve toplumsal refahı iyileştirmek için kaynak tüketiminde planlı bir azalmayı teşvik ederek, sürekli ekonomik büyümenin baskın ideolojisine meydan okur. Makale, büyümeme politikalarını uygulamanın zorluklarını vurgulayarak, seçmenler, politikacılar ve bürokratlar gibi kilit sosyal aktörlerin benmerkezci motivasyonlarına işaret etmektedir. Seçmenler genellikle bir parti veya politika seçerken kendi çıkarlarını önceliklendirirken, politikacılar yeniden seçilmeye odaklanırlar. Bürokratlar ise kendi bütçelerini çoğaltmayı amaçlar. Bu bireysel çıkarlar genellikle büyümemenin daha geniş hedefleriyle çatışır ve daha sürdürülebilir ve eşitlikçi bir topluma geçişi zorlaştırır. Makale, büyümeyi kamusal seçim perspektifinden eleştirel bir şekilde analiz ederek, içselleşmiş çıkarların oluşturduğu sistemik engelleri vurgular. Ayrıca, hükümet kararlarının çoğunlukla kendi çıkarını gözetan bireylerin kolektif eylemlerinin sonucu olduğu ve bu nedenle kamu tercihi perspektifinin, büyümeme yanlıları için yararlı içgörüler sağlama potansiyeline sahip olduğu savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Büyümeme, Kişisel çıkar, Sürdürülebilirlik, Kamu Tercihi.

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Degrowth and Public Choice: Navigating Private Interests and Power Dynamics for a Sustainable Future

Growth is one of the primary subjects of interest of macroeconomics and it is the magic word for economists and policy makers. An increase in the size of a country's economy over time is referred to as economic growth. The gross domestic product (GDP), or the entire amount of goods and services produced within an economy, is commonly used to measure the size of that economy. Drivers of economic growth are well-known, among them capital accumulation, division of labor, saving rate, capital output ratio or institutional structure. The positive consequences of economic growth, such as improved living standards, increasing employment, or reduction in poverty, are also well-known, yet its negative effects became a widely discussed subject only recently. Overpopulation in urban areas, climate change and pollution are only a few of these negative consequences. The obsession of constant growth threatens a sustainable future, where human well-being is achieved within ecological limits, ensuring environmental health, social equity, and economic stability for current and future generations. Genuine sustainability involves rethinking current production and consumption systems, transcending technological efficiency alone, and addressing underlying economic and social structures (Lorek, Cohen and Alfredsson, 2024, p.258). Many scientists across the world believe that the destructive effects of the negative consequences of growth can and do actually exceed its benefits and the degrowth idea and literature have developed around this approach to economic growth.

As early as 1978, Georgescu-Roegen, a Romanian-American mathematician, statistician, and economist known for his *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (1971) warned us that the industrial activity that a great portion of humanity is currently involved in was accelerating the depletion of terrestrial resources, heralding the arrival of a crisis. Growth, the main fixation of mainstream and Marxist economists, had to eventually come to an end. The question then was, "When?". Over the last ten or so years, the symptoms of environmental limit had been blatantly apparent and pollution was becoming more and more prevalent everywhere. Once the largest oil-producing country, the United States was no longer able to raise its crude oil output to meet its current needs (Georgescu-Roegen, 2011). With the demise of Keynesian economics in the 1970s, the 1980s witnessed radical changes in economic policies in both developed and developing world, causing increasing inequalities and generating new regional wars. This article aims at discussing a concept (a new life style or a new economic system for some) which is a product of this period from a very specific perspective. The concept under scrutiny, degrowth, is multi-dimensional and controversial. The perspective that will be used, public choice theory, is also multi-dimensional with its emphasis on utility maximization and methodological individualism, making it necessarily controversial.

In the first part of the article, we will look at the idea of degrowth as objectively as possible. We do not aim to assess the idea of degrowth in terms of its economic or future implications. Some perceive degrowth as a naive dream and some as a necessity. We do not aim to prove one or the other right, since there is an ample literature on both views. In the second part we will present the public choice theory briefly, so that the reader, not familiar with the approach, can get a glimpse of it. Similarly, we do not aim at proving public choice arguments right or wrong, given the fair amount of criticism it already received (Pressman, 2004). The public choice theory just provides us with a sturdy platform to evaluate degrowth. Degrowth is not just economic but also a political concept making it all the more suitable for an analysis from the public choice perspective. The third part of the article will discuss the idea of degrowth from the perspective of public choice. A final part with possible strategy advices for degrowthers will conclude the article.

Degrowth: A Naive Dream or a Necessity

A new scholarly and social movement known as "degrowth" first appeared in France ("décroissance") and other Southern European countries in the 2000s. In the decade that followed, it expanded throughout the English-speaking world ("degrowth"), the German-speaking region ("Postwachstum" or "Wachstumsrücknahme"), and beyond. When we look at the theoretical and historical foundations of degrowth, one particular publication and two names stand out. Published in 1972, *The Limits to Growth* warned that without coordinated global action, humanity risked ecological collapse due to overpopulation, pollution, and resource depletion. The report marked a turning point in environmental thinking, challenging the belief in unlimited growth and promoting the idea of planetary limits. While some criticized its simplistic computer model and methodology, others defended it as a vital warning (Turnbull, 2018, p.271). Of the two names, Georgescu-Roegen was already mentioned above, in the introduction. Another influential figure is André Gorz (born Gerhard Hirsch), who, in the 1970s, offered a striking critique of growth-driven capitalism. He argued that the crisis of capitalist growth stems not only from its economic structure but also from its collision with the planet's physical limits. Gorz acknowledged a hard truth: our current way of life is unsustainable and lacks a viable future. The solution, he suggested, lies not in endlessly increasing consumption, but in consciously choosing to consume less. This, he believed, was the only path to safeguarding the planet's finite resources for future generations (Gorz, 1980, pp.11-13).

The degrowth perspective focuses on the structural and cultural role that the fixation on economic growth has been playing in contemporary, capitalist societies and envisions a radical transformation of fundamental social institutions, while retaining the traditional critique of growth as a monetary rate (measured by GDP) and as a material flow that increases the pressure on ecosystems (measured by ecological footprint). Fundamentally, it is about finding alternatives to economic development and growth (instead of alternative growth paths), repoliticizing economic discussions, and arguing that global environmental justice necessitates a decline in high-income countries' economic output as well as a profound socioeconomic shift toward a decent life for all (Muraca & Schmelzer, 2017, pp. 174-175). One of the most renowned proponents of degrowth, Serge Latouche (2009, pp. 7-8) defines degrowth as follows:

The slogan of 'de-growth' is primarily designed to make it perfectly clear that we must abandon the goal of exponential growth, as that goal is promoted by nothing other than a quest for profits on the part of the owners of capital and has disastrous implications for the environment, and therefore for humanity. It is not just that society is reduced to be nothing more than an instrument or a means to be used by the productive mechanism; human beings themselves are becoming the waste products of a system that would like to make them useless and do without them.

According to degrowth supporters the idea of degrowth challenges the global capitalist system, which prioritizes growth over all other considerations and exploits the environment and people in the process. In other words, the capitalist system, particularly in its neoliberal form, has been widely criticized for its relentless pursuit of economic growth and profit maximization, often at the expense of social welfare and ecological sustainability. This growth-centric logic is embedded in the very fabric of capitalist production and consumption patterns and it tends to prioritize short-term financial returns over long-term human and environmental well-being since the very beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Such an orientation fosters systemic inequality, exploits labor, and commodifies essential aspects of life, including education, healthcare, and natural resources. Private businesses and free entrepreneurship are regarded as central drivers of innovation and the generation of wealth. The idea is that ongoing productivity growth will eventually lead to improved living standards for all. The advocates of

neoliberal capitalism argue that poverty, both nationally and globally, can be most effectively addressed through open markets and unrestricted trade, based on the belief that "a rising tide lifts all boats" or the concept of "trickle-down" economics. They view the lack of clearly defined private property rights—common in many developing nations—as a major institutional hurdle to economic progress and the enhancement of human well-being. (Harvey, 2005, pp. 64-86). Furthermore, the capitalist imperative for constant accumulation not only deepens social divisions but also accelerates ecological degradation, as seen in the unsustainable extraction of resources and unchecked carbon emissions fueling climate change. Capitalism's inherent drive for growth and profitability appears increasingly incompatible with the needs of a just and sustainable future. As Park (2015, p. 195) suggests the objectives of economic growth and environmental sustainability are fundamentally conflicting. As long as national and global strategies to combat climate change are guided by the capitalist belief that financial gains must exceed costs, we will remain unable to effectively prevent or avert the devastating impacts of climate change. Growth is the cornerstone of the global economy. The idea that companies, industries, and nations must yearly increase output whether or not it is necessary is at the center of the system. This perception is driving climatic change and ecological catastrophe. According to activists and experts in the degrowth movement, society should prioritize social and ecological well-being over corporate profits, overproduction, and excessive consumption. This demands a sharp redistribution of wealth, a physical contraction of the global economy, and a shift in the values of the general public toward self-determination, solidarity, and compassion. Degrowth requires social transformation to bring about environmental justice and a living standard for all people within the boundaries of the planet. For Kallis, Demaria and D'Alisa (2015) first and foremost, degrowth is a criticism of growth. It demands that economic growth be abandoned as a societal goal and that public discourse be freed from the economist vocabulary. Beyond that, degrowth also denotes a desired course, where societies will organize and live differently than they do now, while using fewer natural resources. "Commons," "sharing," "simplicity," "conviviality," "care," and "simplicity" are the key symbols of this civilization. Degrowth should not be seen just a problem that could be addressed through economic means. It is at the same time requires a cultural shift. Moving away from cluttered lives and infinite productivity toward shared sufficiency, ecological responsibility, and communal resilience, for example, can contribute to degrowth efforts as much as economic initiatives. In addition, degrowth requires addressing inequality through redistribution and valuing unpaid care work (Meissner, 2022, pp. 201-203).

Degrowth and negative growth within the capitalist system are two different things. Degrowth cannot be achieved through an economic crisis. Negative growth rates resulting from crises do not lead to positive outcomes for nature. Degrowth is defined as a planned decrease in energy and resource consumption which aims to restore the economy's balance with the natural environment in a way that lessens inequality and enhances human well-being. It is a well-thought-out, cogent program to lessen negative effects on the environment, diminish inequality, and enhance well-being. Degrowth provides measures to stop unemployment and even increase employment, like reducing the length of the workweek, offering a living wage guarantee, and launching retraining programs to get people out of industries that are going out of style. The goal of degrowth is to preserve and enhance people's quality of life in the face of a decline in overall economic activity. By implementing measures like progressive taxation and living wage laws, degrowth aims to lessen inequality and distribute money more evenly on a national and international level. Degrowth aims to decommodify the essential products that people require for thriving lives by increasing access to universal public goods and services such as housing, health, education, and transportation. Degrowth is a strategy to reverse ecological degradation, restore soils and biodiversity, and accomplish a quick switch to renewable energy (Hickel, 2021, pp. 1105-1108). What is crucial in this transition is re-examining what is really necessary to live a dignified life and to be free from superfluous and wasteful consumption (Alexander, 2017, p. 160).

People, in fact, may be willing to give up some wealth for a better environment or more leisure time. The idea is that resource depletion, environmental damage, and climate change cannot be stopped by efficiency gains or technical advancements alone. Increases in technological efficiency, instead of reducing resource consumption, can actually lead to greater overall consumption of that resource. William Stanley Jevons first presented this idea in *The Coal Question* (1865), arguing that improvements in coal-use efficiency led to more, not less, coal consumption because efficiency made coal more economically attractive and widespread in use. This paradox is now often referred to in terms of the rebound effect, where efficiency gains reduce the cost of using a resource, leading to increased demand and ultimately higher total consumption. For example, a more fuel-efficient car reduces the cost of driving, which may encourage people to drive more, possibly using more fuel overall than before (Alcott, 2005, p. 10). The economy might also need to contract in size for degrowthers (van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012, p. 912). However, for Latouche (2009, pp. 8-9) de-growth and negative growth are not the same thing. Although the statement is a ridiculous oxymoron, it does a great job of illustrating how much the fantasy of growth rules people's lives. Everyone is aware that even a slight contraction of the economy throws our society into disorder, drives up the unemployment rate, and speeds up the destruction of social, cultural, educational, health, and environmental initiatives that give people a bare minimum quality of life. The calamities that negative growth would cause can be easily envisioned. Nothing is worse than a work-based society without any jobs, just as there is nothing worse than a growth-based society without any growth; and if the world does not change direction that is exactly what is going to happen to people—a social and civilizational decline. Due to all of these factors, de-growth is only possible in a degrowth society, or alternatively, within the confines of a system that operates according to a distinct logic. The alternatives for Latouche are barbarism or de-growth. Therefore, it is necessary for people to give up on the faith or religion of the economy, progress, and development, as well as the illogical and almost idolatrous worship of growth for the sake of growth.

Degrowth scholars can certainly benefit from different schools of economic thought and different approaches. For example, Gräbner-Radkowsch and Strunk (2023b, p. 481) note that degrowth advocates call for a change in current institutions and seek to re-design the global economic system. However, they add, “that these calls could become more substantive if more consistently backed by institutional theories of how institutions emerge and change over time.” This article offers an alternative and a more political approach for them with a potential of swift results. Tekçe (2024, p. 136) states that although the view of degrowth is perceived as a superficial, idealistic, even utopian vision, its echo in academia shows that there is a need to re-evaluate existing development models. There is no doubt that the major ecological problems we face require a comprehensive examination of alternative paradigms, and the concept of degrowth emerges as an important perspective in that respect. Building a society where people can live better lives while working fewer hours and consuming less goods is the aim of degrowth. Hence degrowth requires a structural and institutional change. A mental struggle against the existing system cannot prevail unless supported by changes in educational and judicial systems. According to Sariöz-Gökten & Gökten (2023, p. 297) creation of new institutions as a complement to the new system in the process of changing production and consumption patterns will be effective in accelerating this process and “transitioning”. The success and operability of this new social order can be ensured by spreading these steps to the grassroots on a global scale. However, in order to create this social support, there is a need for a class perspective and an understanding of organization that goes beyond persuading the real beneficiaries of the capitalist system, power asymmetries, and those in power. Otherwise, degrowth will not go beyond an “elitist” sensibility and a mental exercise. A similar argument is presented by Garcia & Martinez-Iglesias (2017, p. 57) “The transition will not only entail political adjustments and the replacement of some technologies by others, but will be accompanied by

social and cultural changes that bring about substantial modifications in the organization of our societies and our ways of life.”

Degrowth advocates contend that the global economy's unrelenting pursuit of growth, rather than its focus on citizens' social well-being, is depleting the planet's natural resources at an unsustainable rate in order to produce goods, many of which are wasteful, unnecessary, and created more to appease consumers than to improve people's quality of life (McCloskey, 2020, p. 44). Green growth emphasizes the role of clean technologies, information and communication technologies, and renewables in achieving economic expansion and advocates for continued economic growth supported by technological innovation. Degrowth, rooted in Malthusian thinking, argues that in a finite ecological system, indefinite economic expansion is unsupportable regardless of technological advances. Degrowth proponents are skeptical of the notion that technology alone can solve deep-rooted environmental issues, pointing out the ambivalence of technology and its unintended negative impacts. Green growth discourse is criticized mainly because of its techno-optimism. Although in practical policy and governance, green growth is currently more applicable and widely adopted (Pyakurel, 2021), Lehmann, Delbard and Lange (2022)'s “findings indicate that experts dealing regularly with environmental and ecological topics tend to reject green growth while being inclined towards growth-critical concepts, i.e. a-growth, post-growth and degrowth.” In short, although green growth is more commonly applied in practice, the perspective of degrowth remains essential to ensure that sustainability initiatives genuinely prioritize long-term ecological health over short-term economic gains. Empirical studies point out that the notion of green growth, which has been offered as an alternative policy direction to prevent ecological breakdown, is not a viable option (Hickel & Kallis, 2019), leaving degrowth the only response to climate change.

Having outlined the environmental and economic rationale behind degrowth, we now turn to a theory that explains why these policies are so difficult to implement and yet how this theory can also provide some useful tools for the advocates of degrowth: public choice theory. While public choice theory is often used to highlight the flaws in government decision-making, showing how self-interest and institutional pressures can shape political outcomes, it can actually offer valuable lessons for degrowth advocates too. If we take its central idea that voters, politicians, and bureaucrats tend to act based on their own interests, then degrowth policies need to be designed with that reality in mind. In other words, for these policies to succeed, they should not only aim for ecological sustainability but also appeal to the motivations of the people who will implement and support them.

The Perspective: Public Choice

The most convenient way to start this section is to define public choice for the reader, not familiar with the “programme”, because for Buchanan, probably the most prominent figure of public choice, it “should be understood as a research programme rather than a discipline or even a sub-discipline of economics.” As he states, public choice provides “analyses of the behavior of persons acting politically, whether voters, politicians or bureaucrats.” (Buchanan, 2003, pp. 13-16). Brennan & Buchanan (1988, p. 179) defined public choice as “the application of the theoretical method and techniques of modern economics to the study of political processes.” Mueller, another prominent name in public choice circles, gives us a similar definition, along with the main subjects covered by the public choice theory. He (2003, pp. 1-2) denotes that the economic study of nonmarket decision-making, or just the application of economics to political science, is the definition of public choice. Political science and public choice both study the same topics: party politics, voting procedures, voter behavior, state theory, bureaucracy, and so forth. However, public choice employs the methodology of economics. Similar to economics, public choice is based on the fundamental behavioral tenet that humans are rational, egoistic utility maximizers. In this case we can safely put forward that public choice is just the application of

economic theory's rational actor model to politics. Similar to the economic model of rational behavior it is based on, public choice also makes the assumption that people are primarily motivated by their own self-interests. Politicians run for election or reelection, bureaucrats work to further their own careers and to boost the budgets of their offices, and voters back candidates and their policy proposals they believe will benefit them individually. In a sense, it “is a study of the political mechanisms or institutions through which taxes and expenditures are determined; that is, it is a study of the demand for and the supply of public goods.” (Ekelund & Hebert, 1996, p. 532). Defining public goods for the unfamiliar reader may be convenient at this point. Ostrom & Ostrom (1971, pp. 206-210) provides us with the basic properties of public goods, which is environmental quality in our case. Purely public goods are mostly indivisible and it is practically impossible to exclude the rest of the society from enjoying their benefits. It means, once it is provided, each member of the society can take advantage of the public good in question unless he/she moves. Public goods, regardless of who bears the expense, are once granted to some, become the property of others. In the context of this article, environmental quality can be exemplified as public good.

About the provision of government services from the point of view of public choice, Niskanen's comparison of central insights of conventional economics and public choice is illuminating. He (2008, pp. 190-191) notes:

The central insight of conventional economics is that the provision of private goods and services is an incidental effect of the incentives and constraints of consumers, entrepreneurs and employees. In other words, the provision of private goods and services is an effect, but is not the primary objective, of any participant in the private economy. Similarly, the central insight of the literature now described as public choice is that the provision of government services is an incidental effect of the incentives and constraints of voters, politicians, and bureaucrats.

After these definitions, and assuming that individuals are self-interested utility maximizers, it is time to focus on the behavior of politicians and bureaucrats. According to the public choice perspective, politicians are not simply selfless law givers and they are not “exogenous to the economic happenings in society. They are seen rather as self-interested competitors maximizing returns (power, position, votes, etc.) under certain constraints (reelection for instance). The important point is that in seeking to optimize their own interests, politicians impact upon the entire economic system.” (Ekelund & Hebert, 1996, p. 531).

Buchanan (2003, pp. 16-17) notes that public choice is claimed to be immoral by some critics who “argue that people acting politically—for example, as voters or as legislators—do not behave as they do in markets. Individuals are differently motivated when they are choosing ‘for the public’ rather than for themselves in private choice capacities.” However, he continues, “Those who respond predictably to ordinary incentives in the marketplace do not fail to respond at all when they act as citizens.”

Before the Second World War, most economists believed that the government was a tool for redistributing income and correcting market imperfections. Considering the role the states played during the Great Depression years this perception is quite understandable. Researchers suggested the state what public goods should be provided, how taxes should be imposed, and how externalities should be fixed. However, not long after the conflict ended, economists started researching how the state makes decisions, and it was believed that the state ought to act in a way that maximizes the welfare of its people in a democracy. The state needs to find out what the people desire in order to maximize their welfare and the information needed for this purpose was meant to come from the democratic institutions of the state (Mueller, 2015, p. 379). Clearly, this is what an average citizen would expect from the government.

Bureaucrats, with the politicians, control the state apparatus. For Niskanen (2008, p. 192) “A bureaucrat is best defined as the head of a bureau with a separate budget. And a bureaucracy is some set of bureaus with a similar role or other common feature.” Government initiatives are not created just because a legislator grants permission and a special interest group wants them to. These need to be “manufactured.” The provider of a program is typically a government body or an agency within the government. Government growth may result from the bureaucracy that runs government programs as well as from individuals, legislators, or interest groups requesting higher spending. The government bureaucracies operate independently, which could result in a larger government (Mueller, 1987, p. 133). Based on its distinctive nature, economic theory offers a valuable new perspective on bureaucracy claims Niskanen (2008, p. 190). He (2008, p. 194) continues “Any theory of the behavior of bureaus must be based on the relationship between bureaus and their sponsors, usually some group of politicians. This relationship, in turn, is shaped by the distinctive incentives and constraints faced by bureaucrats and politicians.” He (2008, p. 195) put forward three assumptions about the behavior of bureaucrats and their political sponsors: “Specifically, bureaucrats were assumed to act to maximize the expected budget of their bureau. Second, the sponsors were assumed to be “passive” in accepting or rejecting the bureau’s budget output proposal without any careful monitoring or evaluation of alternatives. A third implicit assumption.... was those bureaucrats and their sponsors bargain over the full range of the possible combinations of budget and output.”

Public choice mechanisms manifest themselves in real policy contexts. One such mechanism is lobbying, extensively and efficiently used by pro-growth groups such as big oil companies. As a response, pro-degrowth groups may aim at regulating lobbying through banning political donations or “banning fossil fuel lobbyists from climate negotiations. In fact, the proponents of degrowth have a long list of policy proposals, among them caps on resource use, tax reforms, reducing chemical production, building off-grid systems, legislation of the rights of nature, socially responsible investment, developing networks and cooperatives, reforming education, reducing patent monopolies, promoting nature friendly technologies, slow tourism, reducing motorized mobility (Fitzpatrick, Parrique & Cosme, 2022, pp. 7, 11-18). However, all these proposals require a certain political power, since they are not backed by big capital. The widening gap between the rich and the poor, both internationally and within nations, in the last 40 years provides a fertile ground to harness such political power, yet the discussing the conditions of the emergence of such a political body goes beyond the scope of this article.

As such, before we conclude this section a few words about the interest groups and public choice approach will be convenient. The lexicon definition of an interest group is “a group of people that seeks to influence public policy on the basis of a particular common interest or concern.” People who see significant benefits from government action form interest groups. They supply funds to politicians for their campaigns, and in exchange, they frequently get support for their objectives. Similarly, bureaucrats have strong ties with special interest groups given the fact that they, most of the time, depend on politicians for their budgets.

Dream or Necessity from the Public Choice Perspective

Nobody can deny the fact that growth is the ideology and sine qua non of the current economic system. The idea of degrowth is already quite unacceptable for firms whose main goal is to maximize their profits in an ever-growing economic network of relations. For this reason, we will focus on other actors of economic systems, namely consumers (average citizens), politicians (rule makers) and bureaucrats (enforcers). As we just briefly discussed in the previous section, these are the main actors in the public choice approach.

Average citizens would want to maximize their utility, and their income. This is a basic tenet of conventional economics and public choice. It is not unrealistic to expect at least a temporary economic recession with degrowth-oriented policies in action, and in this unequal world economic structure the average citizen cannot tolerate any decline in his/her income. This is even more so in the Global South. Expecting a reduction in the consumption of energy and resources in the wealthiest parts of the world would not go beyond a naive yearning and people of these regions would definitely not be generous enough to channel some of that wealth to less fortunate.

On top of this maximizing behavior, voters in democratic elections typically have limited knowledge of the issues and candidates on the ballot. Voter may choose to be rationally ignorant if the cost of acquiring knowledge exceeds the expected benefit of that particular piece of knowledge. One of the propositions, Downs tries to prove in his *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, is that “For a great many citizens, acquisition of any nonfree political data whatever is irrational, as is acquisition of much free political data, even during election campaigns.” (Downs, 1957, p. 239). Moreover, there is no reason for a voter to try to be informed for an election in which his/her decision would not make a difference. He (1957, p. 243) adds “...unless new data reveal a very large change in some expected income, it does not really make much difference to him who wins. Therefore, it is irrational for him to acquire many costly bits unless they have either large expected values or high variance relative to his original party differential.” In this case, the promises of the degrowth movement will not be able to reach average citizen and affect his/her voting behavior.

When we look at the political arena, we see that the politicians chosen to represent the people in legislative assemblies make the majority of political decisions, not the people themselves. Reelection-seeking politicians are highly motivated to accommodate the demands of small, well-organized organizations, and this is why representative democracy often ends in a dictatorship of the minority. With Downs’ words: “...rationality under conditions of uncertainty leads government to construct policies often aimed more at the good of a few voters than at the good of all, or even of a majority, to act otherwise would be irrational.” (Downs, 1957, p. 93). To put it simply, fighting strong interest groups to provide advantages to the general people, who may not even be aware that they exist or who provided them, does not directly pay off. As a result, there are few incentives for prudent administration that serves the public good, and one does not have to be genius to recognize the overwhelming power of lobbyists working for the key sectors; such as energy.

An interesting and somewhat intriguing argument on this is presented by Buchanan. He (1993, p. 69) states that political actors are not always motivated to deviate from public interest motivational postulates, just because they are initially driven by other goals. Instead, in order for them to survive at all, the structure of the politics in which they operate compels them to act against the interests of the general public. Because politicians, like the rest of us, are occasionally driven by self-interest, we may not always see the outcomes we want. The reason behind the outcomes we observe is that the political incentive systems ensure the survival of politicians who deviate from standards of public interest. For similar reasons that private sector firms are compelled to pursue maximum profits, politicians are compelled to pursue goals in their own best interests (Buchanan, 1993, p. 69). When we look at the bureaucracy; we see a similar picture. It would be very unlikely to expect pro-degrowth initiatives from a budget maximizing bureaucrat who has strong ties with politicians and also special interest groups.

A clean environment is one of the promises of degrowth and it can be considered as a public good. Just like any other good there must be an equilibrium price and equilibrium quantity of clean environment. A simple Marshallian cross diagram can present us these points. What we are looking here is the marginal benefit of clean environment (which gives us the demand for clean environment) and the marginal cost of clean environment (which gives us the supply of clean environment). The same demand

and supply curves can be considered as the demand for and supply of degrowth. In a political process although the demand comes from the general public, the supplier is mostly the political authority. Obviously, the political actions of the governments (laws and regulations pushing for degrowth and so clean environment) determine the supply curve. For the politician, the price of that supply is the loss of income and employment that would be caused by degrowth (at least in the short run, which could cost him/her his/her post). The same is the price that would be paid by the general public, and the higher that price is the lower the demand for degrowth would be. The average consumer would demand for maximum environment quality with minimum degrowth. This is the case for the politician as well, since she/he would seek to supply clean environment (generating agenda) with minimum losses in her/his support.

At this point the primary actors in question are not just the politician and the average citizen. Bureaucrats can also have a timid approach to degrowth having their own maximization concerns in their minds, as noted above. Rationality of all the actors is one of the main assumptions of the public choice approach. Yet with that famous quote in our minds, the “long run is a misleading guide to current affairs. In the long run we are all dead.” (Keynes, 1924, p. 80), the rational behavior that we may expect from these actors would not deviate from utility maximizing short-sighted behavior of mainstream economic theory. This would make degrowth policies extremely difficult to initiate and to support on behalf of politicians, bureaucrats and the average citizen. One viable solution to the puzzle faced by the politician (clean environment vs losing the elections because of the price paid by the general public) is an institutional arrangement, similar to a constitutional change for example, that would force not only the current administration but also the successive ones.

The main point of this article is quite bleak following the classical tradition of Thomas R. Malthus & David Ricardo which rendered economics the title dismal science. As long as profit maximization is the primary goal of today’s business world degrowth is not a viable option for only firms and firm owners, but also for regular people, politicians and bureaucrats from the point of view of the public choice approach. It is not impossible to find academic works challenging this fact. However, the limited number of environmentally friendly or eco-friendly businesses all over the world and their limited impact despite the visible damage the earth suffers prove the argument of this article right.

Free-rider problem is another problem that pro-degrowth population may suffer from within. According to Hardin (1990, p. 185) “The disconcerting implication of public-choice theory is that majoritarian democracy is both conceptually and motivationally flawed.” There is always a free rider problem in costly collective action decisions. Degrowth is a costly collective action decision and it can be achieved through individual contributions. If a person can get away without paying the price incurred by degrowth and benefit from the contributions of others, s/he would do so, making a sanction necessary for non-cooperation. Or as Hardin (1990, p. 193) depicts:

If many of us would benefit from completion of a project that no one of us could afford to undertake alone, we may confront the perversities of the logic of collective action. If we depend voluntary contributions to our collective interest in this project, I may wish to take a free ride on the efforts of others. My own contribution, whether an equal share or otherwise, might benefit me less than it would cost me, even though, if all of us contribute, all of us benefit more than our own contributions. Alas, we may all try to free ride and may therefore all fail to benefit from the project.

In the context of this work, the collective interest in question is degrowth. It may well be affected negatively by the free-riding behavior of even degrowthers, let alone average citizens.

Conclusion: Insights for Degrowthers

In a recent article, Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk (2023a) provide a structured literature review of the discourse surrounding degrowth and the developing world, identifying two main narratives: one highlighting synergies and the other emphasizing challenges. This article challenges degrowth from the public choice perspective, yet it also articulates that the same approach can provide critical insights for degrowthers. Degrowth policies, with their potential to offer a sustainable future and improve current living standards, could benefit the majority of society, if not everyone. However, individuals, politicians, and bureaucrats driven by private interests tend to favor economic growth. Additionally, state policies often do not align with the preferences of individual voters, even if those voters support degrowth. As we've previously noted, a rational voter might avoid supporting degrowth policies, even if these policies would benefit them or future generations, due to short-term priorities or conflicting interests.

So far, the basic argument of this article was that downscaling economic activities in this current profit and utility-centered world economic system is impossible. Expecting rich nations to abandon growth as a policy objective and embrace post-capitalist economic policies, as suggested by Hickel (2018), is not realistic in the short run, no matter how threatening environmental degradation becomes. However, this does not mean that nothing can be done at least to mitigate the destructive effects of uncontrolled growth. It is clear that society's obsession with growth will not fade anytime soon. One way of creating a cleaner environment through profitable investments is to focus on increasing human welfare by building a better infrastructure and improving environment within the existing profit-oriented system. In short; degrowthers must focus on market-based solutions within the capitalist system no matter how critical they are of the system itself. One path to follow can be encouraging people to consume more services than goods and therefore forcing the economic system to produce more services than goods, diminishing the destructive effects of growth without sacrificing it.

Naive policy proposals do not offer realistic solutions and it is unlikely to expect profitable yet welfare enhancing investments (for the average citizen) from private entrepreneurs. Politicians and bureaucrats who control the state apparatus will not favor degrowth unless they see a future in it for themselves. At this point, forming powerful interest groups emerges as a way of convincing them. Because of its cost, it is not easy for degrowthers to form influential interest groups, but once they are established, they may benefit from logrolling practices of legislators. Organized and powerful groups "can bring strong pressure and persuasion to bear on legislators or executive government." (Orchard & Stretton, 1997, p. 412). If pro-degrowth interest groups can cooperate with different interest groups with common goals (or at least with goals indifferent to each other), they may overcome the resistance coming from other interested parties. As Akbulut (2021, p. 106) states it is difficult to figure out how to keep a broad set of ideas open while working on different strategies and actions at various levels. This is a challenge that needs more attention and stronger efforts in the push for degrowth politics. If we admit that change is possible within the existing system through shifting power relations, then the public choice approach provides a trojan horse for the advocates of degrowth.

Another solution can be found in constitutional economics. As such, degrowth can be discussed within the confines of constitutional economics, instead of within the parameters of mainstream. Because as Buchanan (2004, p. 60) states, there is clear-cut distinction between constitutional economics and ordinary or orthodox economics. In orthodox economics choices are made within constraints and these constraints are imposed exogenously to the individual who makes the choice. These constraints restrict "the set of feasible choice options" and they "may be imposed by nature, by history, by a sequence of past choices, by other persons, by laws and institutional arrangements, or even by custom and convention." The approach of constitutional economics is totally different. It "directs analytical attention to the choice among constraints." i.e. the exogenous or given constraints are no more. One

should keep in mind that political, social and economic decisions are shaped within the framework set by the constitution.

As a final word, public choice advocates admit that in certain aspects “[man] is an individual utility maximizer, in a reasonably narrow hedonistic sense” and “in other aspects man is adaptive and associates or identifies himself readily with the larger organizational group of which he forms a part, including the political group” (Buchanan & Tullock, 1999, p. 20). The former may prioritize his/her income, so welfare, the latter on the other hand may prioritize environmental concerns. Public choice examines how personal incentives shape the ability of different groups to organize and exert power over others. If government outcomes are often the result of the collective actions of self-interested individuals rather than a benevolent pursuit of the public good, as public choice theorists put forward, then degrowthers must adopt the rules of the game. Hence, although at first glance, the public choice perspective seems an unlikely choice to assess degrowth, it has the potential to provide useful insights for degrowthers.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval

Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

Author Contributions

The author solely contributed to the conception and design of the study, data collection and analysis, as well as the writing and revision of the manuscript.

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