

FROM AUSTERITY TO DÉPENSE

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– [A] big duel, Uncle . . . Great things are in the offing, and I don't want to stay at home . . .

– You're mad, my boy, to go with those people! They're all in the mafia, all troublemakers. A Falconeri should be with us, for the King.

– For the King, Uncle, yes, of course. But which King? . . . If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, "The Leopard"

[A]ll that city . . . You just couldn't see an end to it . . . It wasn't what I saw that stopped me, Max. It was what I didn't see. . . . In all that sprawling city, there was everything except an end . . . Take a piano. The keys begin, the keys end. You know there are 88 of them . . . They are not infinite, you are infinite. On those 88 keys the music that you can make is infinite. . . . But you get me up on that gangway and roll out a keyboard with millions of keys, and . . . there's no end to them, that keyboard is infinite. But if that keyboard is infinite there's no music you can play.

From the movie "The Legend of 1900"

[A] human sacrifice, the construction of a church or the gift of a jewel are no less interesting than the sale of wheat . . .

It is not necessity, but its contrary . . . "luxury" that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems . . .

Georges Bataille, "The Accursed Share"

The core question in the aftermath of the economic crisis in Europe and the U.S. has been framed as one of austerity vs. spending. Should governments implement austerity or deficit spending measures in order to re-launch growth? While the EU went mostly for the first option, the U.S. opted largely for the second. In conventional economic terms, one could argue that austerity is not working: most European countries are still in recession, while the U.S. is slowly growing again. But in degrowth terms, neither austerity nor deficit spending are the solution. They are the problem. Both, indeed, aim to re-launch growth; degrowthers oppose them precisely because they are ideologically rooted in the growth imaginary. Even those who want spending and growth only for the short-term to exit the crisis, and hope to move beyond growth afterwards, do not realize that this “after” will never come, since it is precisely through the spectre of recession and crisis that growth is legitimated eternally.

To depict the substantial differences between the degrowth society we envision and the contemporary Westernized society in which we live in, it seems useful to briefly deconstruct the austerity and spending imaginaries using two examples from the news.

Cut 1. November 11, 2013: David Cameron’s speech about austerity in the Lord Mayor’s banquet. The UK Prime Minister called for a “fundamental culture change.” He condemned idleness and invoked the traditional British value of hard work. “Put simply,” he said, “no country can succeed in the long term if capable people are paid to stay idle and out of work.” People are trapped into unemployment by high benefits, Cameron noted: “for generations, people who could work have been failed by the system and stuck on benefits”. Benefits will be lowered, he promised, and *no one will see any reward in staying idle* or working less: “We are ensuring that for every extra hour you work and every extra job you do, you should always be better off.” In Cameron’s talk, the State is the problem, not the solution; it has to be shrunk, become leaner and limit itself to setting and enforcing rules, letting markets and the private sector produce wealth. His talk was a celebration of private enterprise: “the UK economy should be based on enterprise . . . we need to support, reward and celebrate enterprise . . . make sure it is boosted everywhere, promoted in schools, taught in colleges, celebrated in communities.”

Cut 2. November 16, 2013: Paul Krugman comments on Lawrence Summers’ talk at the IMF, where the latter raised the spectre of a “secular stagnation” for the U.S. economy, that is a long-term zero growth state. For Krugman this is the result of a liquidity trap, which makes state spending vital. Ideally such spending should be productive; but even unproductive spending is better than nothing, Krugman argues. The important is to get circulation going. Hide money or gold in caves and have enterprises dig it up, as Keynes proposed, Krugman says. Fake a threat from non-existent space aliens and spend for military protection (Krugman’s “own favourite”). Or get U.S. enterprises “to fit out all their employees as cyborgs, with Google Glass and smart wristwatches everywhere.” Even if this does not pay off, “the resulting investment boom would have given us several years of much higher employment, with no real waste, *since the resources employed would have otherwise been idle.*”

The two discourses appear on the surface to be worlds apart. Cameron calls for an unprecedented cultural change, but in fact re-invokes Locke's instructions to the emerging bourgeoisie, what Max Weber later called "the protestant ethic": work hard, and deny self-indulgence and pleasure. This way capital will accumulate and enterprises produce wealth, Cameron suggests. In the current conjuncture there is no doubt that Cameron's project is classist, redistributing upwards. The working classes are asked to tighten their belt and accept the loss of services provided to them, free or subsidized, by the common wealth, so that the rich do not have to shoulder higher taxes to sustain the common wealth in the absence of growth. The Keynesian project instead seems to put the employment of the working classes first; its advocacy of public spending seems, at least in principle, not to be regressive (even if it is not destined to what one would normally call public services).

However, we maintain, what is common between the two discourses is more instructive than what separates them. Both Cameron and Krugman are concerned with "investment." The former thinks that investment will be unleashed by raising the confidence of the markets that State expenditures are under control. The latter wants the State to kick-start investment by pouring money in the economy. They differ on the "how," but what both want is to see capital circulating and expanding again. The second feature they share is their abhorrence of "idleness." For Cameron, the problem is the idleness of workers and the resources wasted by the State to support it. For Krugman the problem is the idleness of capital and the waste of productive resources that could otherwise be invested. For Cameron, the problem is the worker who doesn't work; for Krugman, the capital that doesn't flow.

On the contrary, we degrowthers are not afraid of idleness. Paul Lafargue's provocative "The right to be lazy" is our inspiration. A society that has developed so many resources surely can extend the right to idleness from the few rich to everyone, Lafargue argued in 1883, and André Gorz elaborated 100 years after. We degrowthers also are not afraid of the idleness of capital; we desire it. Degrowth involves slowing capital down. The essence of **capitalism** is the continuous reinvestment of surplus into new production. Wealth in industrialist societies is what can be invested again.

The spending proposed by Krugman and Summers appears wasteful and unproductive in the short-term, but is productive in the long-term: it is a utilitarian spending whose goal is to value capital, so that it does not stand idle, re-launching its circulation and **growth**. Worse, implicit in their proposal is the assumption that public policies must not engage with the meaning of life and the creation of a political collective. On the contrary, for us, the current socio-ecological crisis urges to overcome **capitalism's** senseless **growth** through the means of a social **dépense**. **Dépense** refers to a genuinely collective expenditure — the spending in a collective feast, the decision to subsidise a class of spirituals to talk about philosophy, or to leave a forest idle — an expenditure that in strictly economic sense is unproductive. Practices of **dépense** "burn" capital out and take it out of the sphere of circulation, slowing it down. Such collective "waste" is not for personal utility or for the utility

of capital. It aspires to be **political**. It offers a process through which a collective could make sense of and define the “good life,” rescuing individuals from their illusionary and meaningless privatized lives.

Dépense generates horror, not only among the supporters of austerity, but also among Keynesians, Marxists, and radicals of all sorts, including some environmentalists. To return to our examples, witness the reaction to the set-up for Cameron’s talk. Progressives reacted because the Prime Minister was calling for austerity while standing in a sumptuous hall surrounded by furniture crafted in gold. Instead, we are not particularly concerned with such lavish expenditure, by a public institution such as the City of London Corporation that was founded in the Middle Ages. The gold of the Mayor’s Hall is an unproductive expenditure with the anti-utilitarian essence of a by-gone era that preceded **capitalism**. For Keynesians, what was appalling in this picture is the display of idle wealth; not for us. The contradiction is not between Cameron’s call for austerity in the midst of golden furniture; the real contradiction is between his call for an austere state, in the midst of a place that symbolizes an era during which sovereigns were not shy of **dépense**.

The Mayor’s Hall is a form of public **dépense**, which we do not want to reproduce, but that we not reproach *as such*. We are aware that the gold in London’s Guildhall is the outcome of the exploitation of workers, colonies, and ecosystems by the British Empire. We are against such dispossessions and depletions. But our point here is about the destiny of surplus, not its origin. Social surplus *might* be, and has often been the outcome of exploitation, but it doesn’t *have to*: commonwealth can be generated without exploitation. The progressives who took issue with Cameron’s talk condemned the contradiction between the display of wealth and his call for austerity. We see nothing contradictory between this wealth being a product of exploitation, and Cameron’s call for austerity, i.e. more exploitation of workers.

Many environmentalists will find it hard to accept a non-utilitarian waste of resources, because their **imaginary** is so strongly wedded to the idea of natural scarcity. But scarcity is social. Since the stone-age we have had more than what we need for a basic standard of living. The original affluent societies of Sahlins did not experience scarcity not because they had a lot, but because they did not know what scarcity means and thought they always had enough. They consumed what they gathered, and they never accumulated. Scarcity calls for economizing and accumulating; this is why the common sense in industrial society is that scarcity is the major problem of humanity. This is why scarcity is the *sine qua non* of **capitalism**. Our message to frugal ecologists is that it is better to waste resources in gold decorations in a public building or drink them in a big feast, than put them in good use, accelerating even more the extraction of new resources and the degradation of the environment. It is the only way to escape **Jevons’ Paradox**. Accumulation drives **growth**, not waste. Even in a society of frugal subjects with a downscaled metabolism, there will still be a surplus that would have to be dispensed, if **growth** is not to be reactivated.

For those who are concerned that there are not enough resources to secure basic needs, let alone waste them uselessly, let us note the incredible amount of resources

currently dispensed in bubbles and zero-sum positional games, whose aim is nothing else than the circulation of capital (in fact what Krugman calls for). Economists realize now that bubbles are not an aberration; they are vital for **capitalism** and **growth**. Think of the immense amount of resources spent on professional sports, cinema and commercial modern art, financial services, or all sorts of positional consumption (the latest cars, houses, or gadgets whose only fleeting value is that they are the latest). A football game was as pleasant as 50 years ago, when sports were practiced by amateurs, and a movie or a painting no better today than then, despite the huge amounts of capital that circulate to finance and market sports and arts. “Ferraris for all” is the elusive dream of **growth**, but when everyone has a Ferrari, the Ferrari will be the Fiat of its generation. Economists have called for limits on such zero-sum competition for positional consumption, limits that would liberate resources for real **growth**. We instead want to liberate these resources to secure basic needs and to collectively feast with the rest to avow **the political** of a new era. We in degrowth have made considerable advances in thinking about the State and autonomous institutions that will cater for the satisfaction of basic needs. Now we need to think about the institutions that will be responsible for the socialization of unproductive **dépense** and the ways in which circulating surplus will be limited and expended.

At the same time that capitalist discourses blame the idleness of the “factors of production” at the societal level, they also foster the privatization of wasteful consumption: the individual can get drunk, spend all his or her savings at the casino, organize private parties with champagne and caviar for his or her entourage, deplete accumulated resources in luxurious hobbies or conspicuous shopping, or lease beautiful bodies of women and men for orgiastic VIP parties. All this personalized **dépense** is allowed in the name of the liberty of each individual to elusively search in his or her personal sphere for the meaning of life. The unquestionable premise of a modern society is the right of each person to accumulate resources beyond basic needs and use them for realizing what he or she thinks is a “good life.” As a consequence, the system has to constantly grow to allow each and every one the opportunity to pursue this right, as it pretends to do in the abstract.

This central feature of modernity has affected many strains of Marxism too, which pushed the dream of collective emancipation to the extreme by means of a life of material abundance for everyone. Actually existing socialist regimes found that basic needs could well be satisfied for everyone. But in doing so, they repressed private **dépense** and disavowed socialized **dépense** (counting out military parades and ceremonies in honour of Stakhanovite bureaucrats). The hypothesis put forward here is that it was the stifling of both private and social **dépense** that led to the failure and eventually collapse of these regimes.

In the degrowth society that we imagine, **dépense** will be brought back to the public sphere, but sobriety will characterize the individual. This call for personal sobriety is not in the name of financial deficits, ecological limits or moral grounds; ours is not the Protestant call of the supporters of austerity. Our claim for sobriety is based on the premise that finding the meaning of life individually is

an anthropological illusion. Consider for example those rich individuals who after having it all get depressed and don't know what to do with their lives. Finding meaning alone is an illusion that leads to ecologically harmful and socially unjust outcomes since it cannot be sustained for everyone. The sober subject of degrowth that we envisage, does not aspire to the private accumulation of things because he or she wants to be free from the necessity to find the meaning of life individually. People should take themselves less seriously, so to say, and enjoy living free from the unbearable weight of limitless choice. Like the pianist in "the Legend of 1900" the sober subject knows well not to desire a piano with limitless keys. Like the pianist, he or she will always prefer a limited vessel, to the limitless city. The sober subject finds meaning in relations, not in itself. Liberated from the project of finding individually the meaning of life, he or she can be devoted to a daily life centered around **care** and reproduction and participate to the societal **dépense** democratically determined. Anthropologically, this subject of degrowth already exists. It is the subject of the **nowtopians** and **eco-communities**. It is to be found among the **back-to-the-landers** who work the land, or the city dwellers cultivating **urban gardens**, or occupying the squares. The open question is how it can spread and replicate; but this is a political question, not an individual question.

The pair personal sobriety-social **dépense** is to substitute the pair social austerity-individual excess. Our dialectical **imaginary** is "**political**" in the deep sense of the term. Compare it to the supposedly "political" economy of Krugman, who like the character in the Leopard, wants to change everything (even invent aliens!), just for things to stay the same. It is indeed the paradox of the contemporary political economy that it must not be political, i.e. it must not participate to build the (new) meaning of life, the latter being an affair let to individuals and their private networks. Instead, we maintain that once basic needs have been secured, it is in deciding collectively "what to dépense" that a sense of the "good life" can be constructed and the political of a new era be liberated. The realm of meaning starts where the realm of necessity ends. A degrowth society would have to build new institutions to choose in a collective way how to dedicate its resources to basic needs on the one hand, and different forms of **dépense** on the other. The political does not end with the satisfaction of basic necessities; it starts there. The choice between collective feasts, Olympic games, idle ecosystems, military expenditures, or voyages to space will still be there. The weight on democracy and on deliberative institutions will be more intense than now that the dogma of **growth** and continuous reinvestment has evaded the difficult questions of what we want to do once we have enough. The political economy will be interested in the sacred again. And the economy of austerity, for the most and private enjoyment for few will give its place to an economy of common feast for all sober individuals.

Vive la décroissance conviviale! Pour la sobriété individuelle et la dépense sociale!