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Recensões

CHERTKOVSKAYA, EKATERINA; PAULSSON, ALEXANDER; BARCA, STEFANIA (EDS.) (2019), *TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DEGROWTH*. LONDON: ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, 280 PP.

Towards a Political Economy of Degrowth is a brave attempt at establishing a theoretical framework for a mostly academic movement. The articles assembled provide precious insights into different fields of theory and of struggle, trying to bring them together often by the flimsiest of bridges and connections. The strong critiques of capital often refocus to aim at growth rather than capitalism itself, with the book being coherent with its initial premise of not attempting to produce a strong and coherent theory.

The literature, according to the authors, has not manifested “any intent to become an orthodox scientific paradigm with a unified political programme”, but a “multi-sited, multilingual and multiform network supporting the opportunity for life ways motivated by desires other than growth” (p. 4). This is the pinnacle of weak theorising, proposing interesting theories and reducing them to a collection of opinions. This heterodoxy “allows degrowth to be an inclusive conversation” and is also probably why degrowth is permanently on the sidelines of politics and policy, as its celebration of “the multitude of activities and life choices [...] do risk remaining impotent towards powerful economic and social drivers such as money, advertisement, and debt, or the global trade system” (p. 5). This approach makes degrowth impotent facing political tsunamis and historical tidal waves as the ones we are currently living in. The authors criticise lack of strategy, excessive focus on the local, ideational origin and detachment from material interests “of any particular social constituency”, with policy driven proposals of a very technical nature. The decision to embrace the practice of “weak theorising” has led to the production of weak theories and practices.

The book has some very impressive contributions for the fields of political theory, sustainability and social movement theory. The case built by Paulsson for the abolishment of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a reference for social and environmental advancement creates a clear distinction between good and bad growth, with social and environmental “cancers” mobilising labour and resources away from necessary activities into “diseases” – comparing the growth of cancer cells in an organism to a large part of the economic growth in a nation. This outlines the dangers of developing measurements without a clear and explicit theory, as it happened historically with GDP. Buch-Hausen proposes a steady-state economy, with globally auctioned physical depletion quotas and distributive institutions which reduce inequality by defining minimum and maximum limits on income and wealth. This is pointed as a critical way forward for the field of Comparative Political Economy, refocusing on alternative objects of study and distancing itself from the present state of the art, dubbed “Comparative Capitalisms”. Koch identifies the centrality of human needs as a common denominator for uniting Marxian and degrowth theories, while pointing out that Marx-inspired social, economic, and ecological thoughts need to rid themselves completely of the growth-mania, which was undeservedly attributed to Marx and dominated the twentieth century’s Marxism.

Barca and D’Alisa’s contributions produce the strongest attempts to overcome the weaknesses initially identified. Barca proposes integrating reproduction and care as forms of socially necessary work that also need to be liberated, to allow the full development of human potential and freedom, as an antidote to romanticising this work as an end in itself. Also, she acknowledges that the perspective of “liberation from work” implied in degrowth alienates wage labour, and that an “alternative worth fighting for” implies the liberation of waged labour from treadmill metabolism through working-class environmentalism, ecosocialism and workers’ control of production, identifying climate jobs campaigns as a main actor in this. D’Alisa identifies the unwillingness to enter “the Winter Palace” in the field of degrowth, avoiding the state altogether in the tradition of anarchism and of Marxist autonomist. Quoting Rackham, D’Alisa points out that “fostering small-scale organisations is a bad idea, because these small degrowth (or anarchist, or Marxist autonomist) islands cannot avoid meeting their exchange or purchasing need through capitalist markets; they cannot solve environmental problems caused by capitalist business; and they cannot avoid the state’s over imposition of laws, regulations and polices”. The only possibility for Rackham is a process of revolutionary and radical rupture and D’Alisa concludes on the need for a new theory of change for degrowth, integrating Gramsci’s concept of “integral state” to help address the issues of state and power.

The claim that “degrowth has emerged as a powerful call for an alternative economic model” (p. 1) is denied in the book, as it describes the field at its best as a series of successful biennial conferences in Europe, a number of collaborative transdisciplinary publications and a conference in the European Parliament, with a “call to the European Union, its Member States and institutions to stop growth-dependency” (p. 7). The brilliance of many of the contributions to this book cannot overcome the reality that at the moment the degrowth movement is mostly an academic exercise.

Work, wage labour and the state will be central in the upcoming economic, social and climate crises. In a time of nationalisations, mass unemployment and massive public works, degrowth by itself might be as alienating as austerity. Degrowth as a political economy does not seem powerful enough, as a lot of the authors of the book think so. The absence of topics regarding climate change from most of the debate throughout the book is worrying as the urgency for action to stop climate chaos, which needs the inclusion of degrowth in the debate, seems lost to it.

Edited by Alina Timóteo

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