



EconoMag

The Show that demystifies Economics

The “Degrowth” Movement©

by Max Farrington and Abby Klein

Welcome to another edition of EconoMag on EnglishWaves.

In the past, a country was considered to be economically wealthy if it had substantial gold reserves, or later pounds, and then dollars. Today, wealth is more closely associated with economic growth, or the idea that the economy can continue to get larger and richer. When there is no growth, there is higher unemployment, less money the government can spend, and an increase in countries' debt. This can be seen daily in the news. However, we rarely hear about an alternative: an idea called “degrowth.” This is a blend of political, social, economic, and philosophical movements that focuses on ecology, anti-consumerism, and anti-capitalist ideas.

This movement was begun in the 1970s by people concerned about the consequences of consumerism and the idea of the cycle of constant production and consumption, and the subsequent depletion of the earth's resources; climate change theories existed back then, too. This “degrowth” ideology has had a resurgence, many members of *Europe Écologie Les Verts* (France's Green Party), as well as members of other French political parties are in favor of this alternative lifestyle and economic model.

Degrowth is a major shift in many ways, as it removes economic growth as the primary measure of a country's success. Today, economic growth is the impetus for many policies that get made. For example, when the GDP (Gross Domestic Product, or PIB in French) increases, energy consumption also grows, which means that there are more resources being depleted in the world. On the plus side, renewable energy seems to be gaining ground in this power battle.

In 2014, nearly 280 billion Euros was invested in green energy. But according to Fabrice Flipo, a philosopher of science and techniques, this is actually more “energetic cannibalism,” because to build and run wind turbines or photovoltaic panels takes a certain amount of energy, which is not always all renewable. Another problem with the photovoltaic panels is that the gases used to produce them are pollutants, and ultimately increase the Greenhouse Effect.

From a purely economic viewpoint, developed countries like France won't ever again experience periods like the *trente glorieuses* (the years between 1945 and 1973 that brought extreme growth to the country). In fact, the idea that we will always have exponential growth is crazy. According to the defenders of the "degrowth" movement, the more economic growth, the faster we destroy the planet - not only through resource depletion and climate change, but also by the food we eat.

Since 2013, we have produced enough food each year to feed the whole planet, so while that overall percentage of malnourishment decreased, there has also been a significant increase in population. Yet much of that extra food is wasted, which fits into the capitalistic way of life of the world in which we live today, where most of us must buy the food we consume, and if one does not have enough money, he or she goes hungry. Not only its consumption, but much of food production has also become inhumane, particularly meat production, in which a huge quantity of water is necessary. The agricultural sector is a major employer and revenue-source worldwide, and part of our everyday lives. For example, Nestlé, a Swiss-based transnational food and beverage company, is the largest food company in the world, with profits in 2014 of around 13 billion Euros, and employing nearly 350,000 people. This example is just one company, so add to this others such as Unilever, Danone, and all the smaller producers as well.

This kind of out-of-scale production and waste cycle is precisely what the "degrowth" movement wants to change. Supporters of the movement don't wish to go back in time, but rather to change our direction. They believe that today we are heading quickly toward disaster as we continue to believe in perpetual growth and constant production. The disaster they predict will affect everything: our way of eating, access to clean water, our energy consumption, and the climate. Rather than being fatalistic about it, the movement wants to direct us toward sustainability, but not through politics and social policies, rather with significant lifestyle change on an individual level.