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Growth, degrowth, post-growth

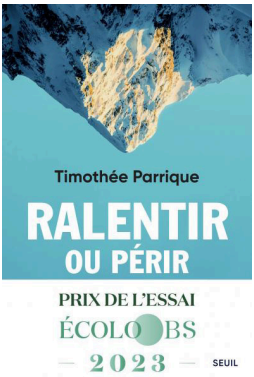
Summary of the book *Ralentir ou périr*
by Timothée Parrique

leDoTank

in partnership with Nexia S&A

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Timothée Parrique – *Ralentir ou périr* – Éditions du Seuil – 2022

Timothée Parrique, a French economist born in 1989, holds a doctorate from Stockholm University with a thesis on the economics of degrowth (2019). He is a researcher at the University of Lausanne and a lecturer and researcher in ecological economics at Lund University in Sweden. His work focuses on degrowth and post-growth.

The "Lu pour vous" collection

The "Lu pour vous" collection offers summaries of academic works that are references on issues related to Corporate Social and Environmental Responsibility (CSR).
Each theme is meant to be addressed by authors holding contrasting views.
These summaries do not represent the opinion of the DoTank, which bears no responsibility for the views expressed. Their sole aim is to give readers resources for their own thinking and to make them want to explore the books and their authors further.

Growth, degrowth, post-growth

Foreword

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and degrowth have a deeply ambivalent, even contradictory, relationship. CSR, as it is mostly practised, rests on the idea that capitalism can be "greened" from within: reducing negative externalities, improving working conditions, reporting on environmental impact, all while maintaining, or even stimulating, economic growth. It thus belongs to the paradigm of sustainable development and "green growth," seeking to reconcile economic performance with ecological responsibility. Degrowth, by contrast, radically challenges this compromise: for its theorists, from Serge Latouche to Timothée Parrique, no marginal improvement in business practices can offset the expansionist dynamic inherent in capitalism, whose logic of accumulation remains incompatible with the planet's biophysical limits. From this point of view, CSR may even function as a legitimising device, a form of institutionalised greenwashing that neutralises systemic critiques by offering them a partial and reassuring answer.

The central question then becomes: can CSR be a lever for transformation towards a post-growth economy, or is it merely an adaptation mechanism allowing companies to survive the ecological critique symbolically without calling their fundamental model into question?

Introduction

Timothée Parrique is the author of a thesis entitled "Political Economy of Degrowth" (2019), which offers a broad state of the art of the degrowth literature as a proposal for escaping the climate impasse. *Ralentir ou périr* is its condensed version for the general public.

The book is built around a threefold movement: understanding why the growth-based economic model is a dead end (the rejection); sketching the outlines of a post-growth economy (the project); and conceiving degrowth as a transition to get there (the journey).

From the outset, Parrique sets out the two concepts that structure the whole work. He defines degrowth as "a reduction in production and consumption to lighten the ecological footprint, democratically planned in a spirit of justice," and post-growth as "a stationary economy in harmony with nature, where decisions are made together and wealth is equitably shared so that we can prosper without growth." Degrowth thus refers to the transition between the two.

The book unfolds over eight chapters. If one main idea is to be retained, it is that planetary boundaries will not allow our economy to grow forever. Moving through degrowth, a transitional phase, would be necessary to reach the post-growth economy, characterised by a steady state that would allow us to live in harmony with nature, respect the planet's ecological budget, improve social conditions and reduce inequalities between individuals as well as between countries.

1.
The rejection: growth (chapters I to IV)

GDP, an indicator of economic agitation

The first chapter presents GDP, created by Simon Kuznets, one of the best-known economists of the early twentieth century. It was first used to measure the effectiveness of the New Deal, the stimulus plan that helped end the 1929 crisis; it then proved effective in mobilising the American economy during the Second World War. Note that Kuznets himself pointed out that GDP was not designed to promote human well-being and should not become an end in itself. In this critical tradition, Parrique describes it as an indicator of "economic agitation" that says nothing about the desirability of economic activities. Despite its limits, GDP ended up on everyone's lips: from a simple accounting tool, growth became an ideology.

After the Second World War, growth had a clear function: to revive economies, ensure full employment, eradicate poverty, and enrich the population by giving it access to durable goods. Gradually, over the decades, the indicator became the objective: growth for growth's sake, with no underlying purpose[1].

The impossible decoupling

The second chapter is the core of the book's ecological argument. Parrique draws on his own work (*Decoupling Debunked*, 2019) and a literature review supporting the conclusion that significant decoupling (notably total, global and permanent) has not yet occurred and is unlikely to happen. For it to be total, GDP would have to be decoupled not from one but from all environmental pressures: decoupling from CO_2 comes at the cost of recoupling with mineral resources, for instance when combustion-engine cars are replaced by electric ones. It would have to be global, but the North decouples at the cost of the South recoupling, for instance when European industry relocates to China. It would have to be permanent, yet GDP tends to recouple after temporary decoupling, as after the shale gas boom in the United States: carbon intensity fell sharply while the energy system was in transition, but the economic recovery that followed caused emissions to rise again. It is the very logic of green growth that is thus refuted. Chapter 2 on the impossible decoupling was intended to be Parrique's last text on the subject, so firmly does he consider the matter closed.

The social limits of growth

Parrique highlights the social limits of growth by drawing on arguments from feminist economics about the reproductive functions of the economy: there is a non-economic sphere of society (social fabric, rest, family) on which the economy relies in order to function. Yet to grow, the economy frequently encroaches on this sphere: more time at the office means less time with one's children, walking the dogs, or running the neighbourhood football club. All these things support people's life balance, and growth then becomes a zero-sum game in which the market sphere grows by undermining the very foundations on which it develops.

This social reproduction includes domestic work and mutual aid within families or among friends, but also reciprocity, informal work, volunteering, associative and activist engagement, and in general all those small actions that make living together possible. The expansion of the market economy must remain proportionate to this supporting infrastructure, and overly intense market growth acts as a force of social dissolution. There is another social limit: some things cannot be commodified without being degraded; commercial logic cannot be extended to social spheres governed by different logics.

Parrique even puts forward the hypothesis that the secular stagnation observed in the West may be a backlash from this phenomenon. This is the whole idea of Herman Daly's "uneconomic growth" (Daly being an economist and a founding figure of degrowth): beyond a certain threshold, growth works against human development, and even against the economy itself.

The economic limits: the false promises of growth

Growth has not solved poverty: INSEE estimates the number of poor people in metropolitan France at around 10 million. Nor has growth reduced inequality. The "Easterlin paradox" refers to a situation in which economies keep getting richer without increasing citizens' well-being. According to the author, all this shows that the fundamental question is not increasing GDP but distribution. Poverty can be eliminated by reducing inequality through the redistribution of existing wealth. Work can also be found for every jobseeker without necessarily increasing material production.

The richest 1%, only 51 million people out of 8 billion, have captured 38% of all wealth created since 1995, while the poorest half of humanity has received only 2%. The richest 10% worldwide are responsible for half of total greenhouse gas emissions. The symmetry between wealth and polluting emissions is almost perfect.

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1. Arnaud Orain — *Le monde confisqué. Essai sur le capitalisme de la finitude (XVI^{e}–XXI^{e} siècle)* — Flammarion — 2025

2.
The journey: degrowth (chapters V to VI)

A short history of degrowth

Chapter 5 reconstructs the political birth of the term "degrowth" (whose emergence Parrique attributes to French authors) and traces the history of the movement from growth objection to post-growth. It offers a good annotated bibliography and explains why he chose to keep the term degrowth, with all the controversy that entails: the term underlines the radical nature of the turn being proposed.

The terms "a-growth" and "post-growth" tend to blunt the polemical charge of the word degrowth, even though the latter is gaining ground in academic debate. The chapter introduces the movement's major intellectual figures, from Georgescu-Roegen and his entropy principle to steady-state economists such as Herman Daly, by way of Serge Latouche and his "decolonisation of the imagination," and situates Parrique's contribution within this tradition while distinguishing it from the most anti-economic currents.

The economics of the ebb: operationalising degrowth

Parrique clarifies the nature of this degrowth phase, made necessary because today's economy is in overshoot: it is too big, too "agitated," too hungry for resources and energy to be fully greened as it stands. The constraint of degrowth is a given; what matters then is ensuring that principles of democracy, social justice and well-being are respected. This concern is what distinguishes degrowth from a recession: the reduction in activity is the direct result of a set of policies, not a chaotic and disastrous event endured, as it can be in our growth-oriented economies.

Among the many policies proposed are outright bans (advertising), quota policies (to share out the remaining air travel), and the demonetisation of part of production by extending free public services to new sectors: internet, telephony, water, etc. Everything is designed so that the reduction in purchasing power accompanies the reduction in production and is made acceptable by guaranteed access to basic goods, along with more free time and stronger ecosystem services.

Degrowth strategies mainly target already-rich countries in ecological overshoot. The aim is to free up resources for countries of the Global South, which will need to produce and consume more in the coming decades. This is the logic of "contraction and

convergence": degrowth for the most privileged and growth for those who need it most.

Timothée Parrique builds a trajectory: from lightening the ecological footprint to harmony with nature, from democratic planning to democratic control of decision-making, from a demand for social justice to a fair sharing of wealth, from a concern for living well to prosperity without growth. These four cardinal points provide orientation in degrowth thinking: the relationship to nature, the relationship to democracy, a theory of justice, and a non-utilitarian purpose of human life.

3.
The project: post-growth (chapters VII to VIII)

The post-growth society

At the end of this necessary degrowth lies the post-growth society, in which the first aim is to meet criteria of sustainability and conviviality (that is, the well-being of stakeholders) before thinking about productivity. Growth is not banned; society has simply become indifferent to it. Innovations can still occur, but instead of mechanically serving production as they do today, they could serve other purposes, such as reducing working time. Such an economy is governed by needs rather than prices, through increased forms of participation at every level of economic life: citizens' councils, cooperatives, etc.

One can also imagine generalising existing arrangements: there is a "degrowth already-here" from which to draw inspiration in tipping the economy towards post-growth. For example, a company can already include in its articles of association a "production mission" describing an objective other than profitability. This principle would put an end to the pursuit of profit, provided that only companies whose missions are declared to be in the general interest by the community are created. Degrowth generates a "triple social dividend": participatory economy, lower inequality and poverty, and better quality of life.

Answers to twelve criticisms of degrowth

The final chapter lists and answers twelve common criticisms of degrowth. Reading it, one will admire the author's talent as a polemicist. First, Parrique rightly explains that this whole transition must take place with social justice, and therefore that it is mainly and above all today's rich who will have to benefit less from a growth that will no longer exist, and that it is these same rich who will have to give up most of the material, energy and symbolic advantages they currently display over the rest of the population.

The chapter responds in particular to objections that recur in public debate: degrowth would be a luxury for rich countries, would be incompatible with funding public services, would lead to mass unemployment, would be undemocratic because imposed from above, or would amount to a nostalgic return to pre-modern ways of life. Parrique answers each by drawing on the academic degrowth literature, while maintaining that the transition will have to be politically constructed rather than suffered.

Conclusion

In his determination to show degrowth in a favourable light, Parrique only reluctantly concedes that the transition to post-growth could be hard, and entirely omits to present the risks it entails. While this bias has something galvanising for the imagination, it leaves the critical mind unsatisfied. Other readers have pointed out that the book treats growth ("limitlessness in a limited world") as the primary problem, prior to capitalism itself, which broadens the critique without reducing it to a doctrinaire anti-capitalism, but may also lead to underestimating the weight of economic structures in the reproduction of growth.

The author argues that growth is not inevitable but a choice. And that choice is now proving entirely counterproductive: the economy has become a weapon of mass destruction. It is in this tension between scientific rigour and activist ambition that both the strength and the limit of the book lie: an academically documented manifesto whose considerable readership reflects a growing social aspiration for credible alternatives to the growth paradigm.

About

LeDoTank

LeDoTank is an association whose mission is to help close the gap in knowledge and understanding of mid-sized companies, a gap that affects every field: governance, CSR, financing, social performance, etc.

LeDoTank is part of the mid-sized company ecosystem, initiating projects that bring together entrepreneurs, experts and researchers to better identify their specific challenges and highlight their distinctiveness in order to propose suitable solutions. The aim is to help renew their practices and inform decision-makers about the rules of the game regarding these companies' specific features.

To progress along these paths, leDoTank can count on its partners: companies or organisations devoting resources (financial and/or human) to finding concrete answers to the societal issues affecting their markets or immediate environment, and more broadly the common good.

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Nexia S&A

Nexia S&A is a group of 500 professionals, including 48 partners, specialising in audit, chartered accountancy and financial management consulting.

The group and its teams provide their clients (SMEs, mid-sized companies and large groups) with value-creating solutions in accounting, finance and ESG, and support them in implementing them.

Nexia S&A upholds its values of team spirit, trust and competence, and bases its independence on full control of its capital by its partners and employees.

The group pursues a strategy of controlled growth based on the on-the-ground presence of its partners and managers, an evolving service offering, widespread digitalisation, an international dimension, and the development of CSR both internally and for its clients.

Nexia S&A expresses its social responsibility through its governance and management practices, and is very pleased to support leDoTank in its mission.

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