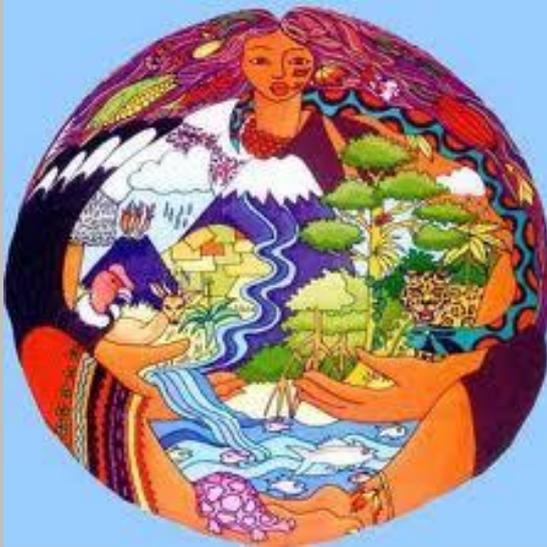


# 'Living well' versus development?



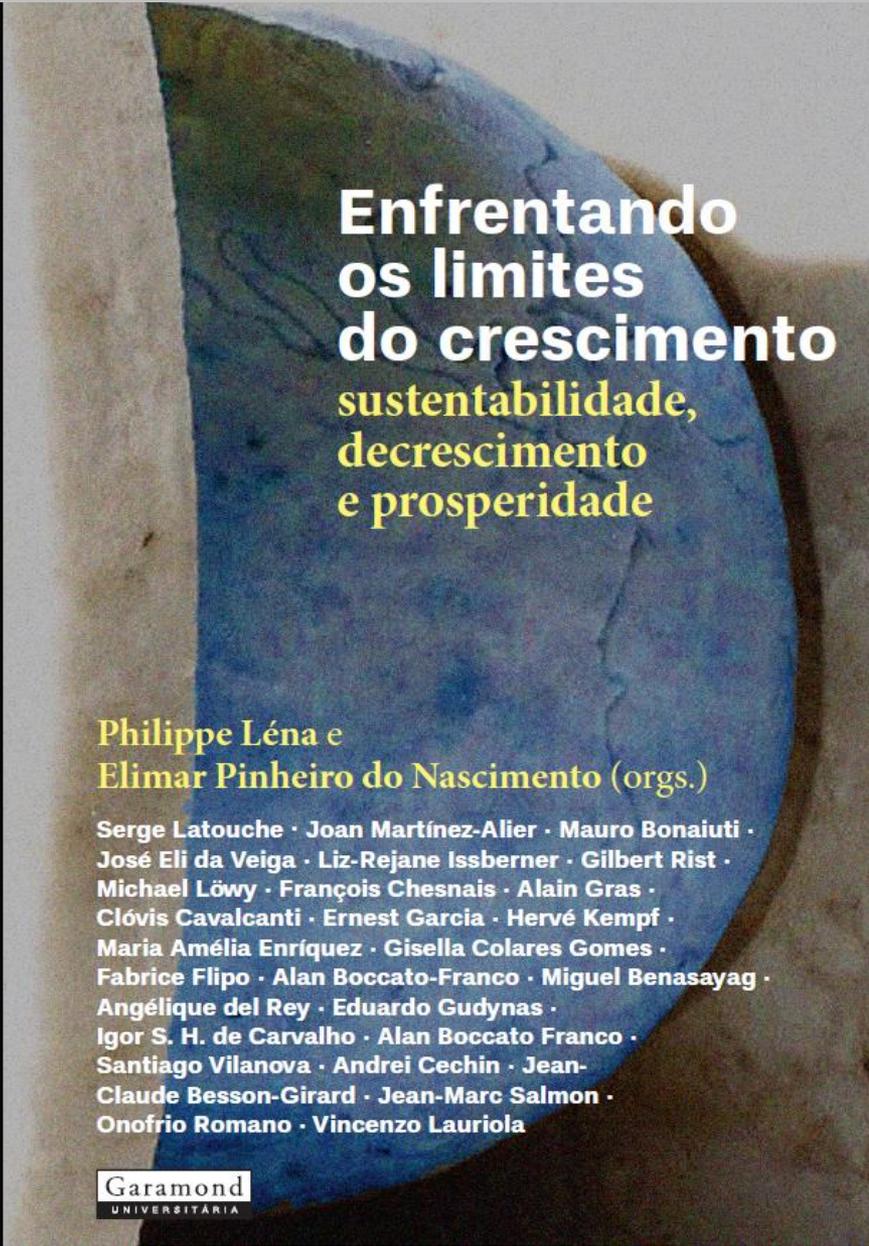
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Research Structure on  
Sustainability Studies***

***Seminar How to strengthen democracy within Europe and  
its structures? The search for a social, sustainable and  
democratic economy***

***26 and 27<sup>th</sup> of May, Marseille, France***



# Enfrentando os limites do crescimento

sustentabilidade,  
decrecimento  
e prosperidade

Philippe Léna e  
Elimar Pinheiro do Nascimento (orgs.)

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José Eli da Veiga · Liz-Rejane Issberner · Gilbert Rist ·  
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Garamond  
UNIVERSITÁRIA

Based on “Decrecimiento e bem viver: algumas linhas para um debate adequado”. In Philippe Léna & Elimar Pinheiro do Nascimento (ed.): *O pós-desenvolvimento em questão: Prosperidade, decrecimento e sustentabilidade*. São Paulo, Garamond, 2012, pp. 201-227.

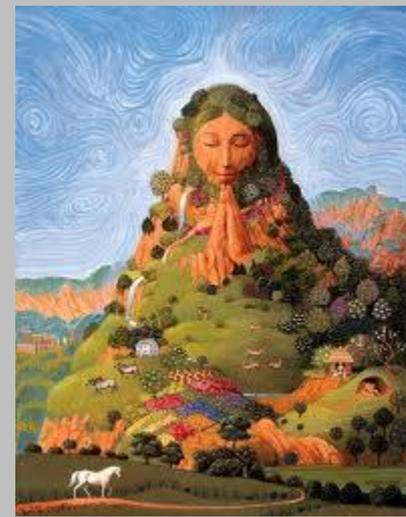
This above mentioned article is part of the research project *Transitions Towards a Post-Carbon Society: Redistributive Impacts and Everyday Life in a Context of Non-Fossil Energies and Climate Change* (CSO2011-24275, Spanish R&D Programme).

## *Introduction*

I'm going to discuss some criticisms of development.

Degrowth's criticism of development is mainly based on the ecological crisis. Other critiques have focused more on inequality. In my opinion, living well ("buen vivir", "vivir bien", "sumak kawsay", ) can be understood as a reformulation and updating of these latter perspectives. Anyway, a dialogue around both ideas seems convenient and could be very informative. Such a dialogue should explore what both concepts have in common (particularly their critique of development, their scepticism regarding its promises and its presumed universalism), as well as the most important specific characteristics of each (references to the limits to growth and environmental sustainability in the case of degrowth, and the connotations of cultural identity and community orientation in the case of living well, etc.), paying attention to potential areas of disagreement, conflict and incompatibility.

This is the aim of this presentation; which is meant to participate in an exchange of views. My own view in this exchange starts with the suspicion that the identification between "premodern" and "sustainable" that can be found today in many idealized descriptions of indigenous cultures is a mirror-image of Eurocentric prejudices. It would be much more realistic to recognize that the plurality of examples and experiences is almost endless and to accept that no culture provides a guarantee of sustainability.



# 1. Beyond development

Questioning development and, above all, *the expectation of continued development* in the future, has been and continues to be controversial in Latin America, in Europe and everywhere.

[And doing so before an audience of development students is almost impossible (and the fact that they are proponents of alternative, humane, socially aware, local development does not alter in the least this assessment; quite the contrary, as they tend to be individuals that already “know how to resolve” the undeniable problems of development)].

The commitment to development is essentially the same everywhere, in all countries, rich and poor, left and right. Development settled in human consciousness and became the universal religion of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Television and soft drinks, its Eucharist; and education, the practical tool for its legitimacy. If the defense of development has an even stronger emotional appeal in certain contexts in the Third World (as it also has in economically deprived areas in rich countries), it is only for symbolic reasons; perhaps questioning development dashes all hope.



**This is something I still find surprising, as the origins of the promise of development can still be debated, while on the contrary, there is little doubt that the critique of development has from the beginning been expressed with more strength and persuasiveness in the South. To escape sub-development by imitating the industrialized societies of the West (instead of following the Soviet communists) was the offer Truman made to the elites of post-colonial societies more than 60 years ago. The first ones to understand the inherent falsity of this offer were precisely certain spiritual and political leaders of anti-colonization. To some extent, some of them had anticipated and even understood that neither of the two variants of industrial modernization (capitalist or socialist) could provide an adequate model. Everyone has heard what Gandhi wrote in 1928, in the weekly *Young India*: “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.” Gandhi had said two years before that “to make India like England and America is to find some other races and places of the earth for exploitation”; and he had argued that, given that Western countries had already “divided all the known races outside Europe for exploitation and there are no new worlds to discover,...What can be the fate of India trying to ape the West?”**



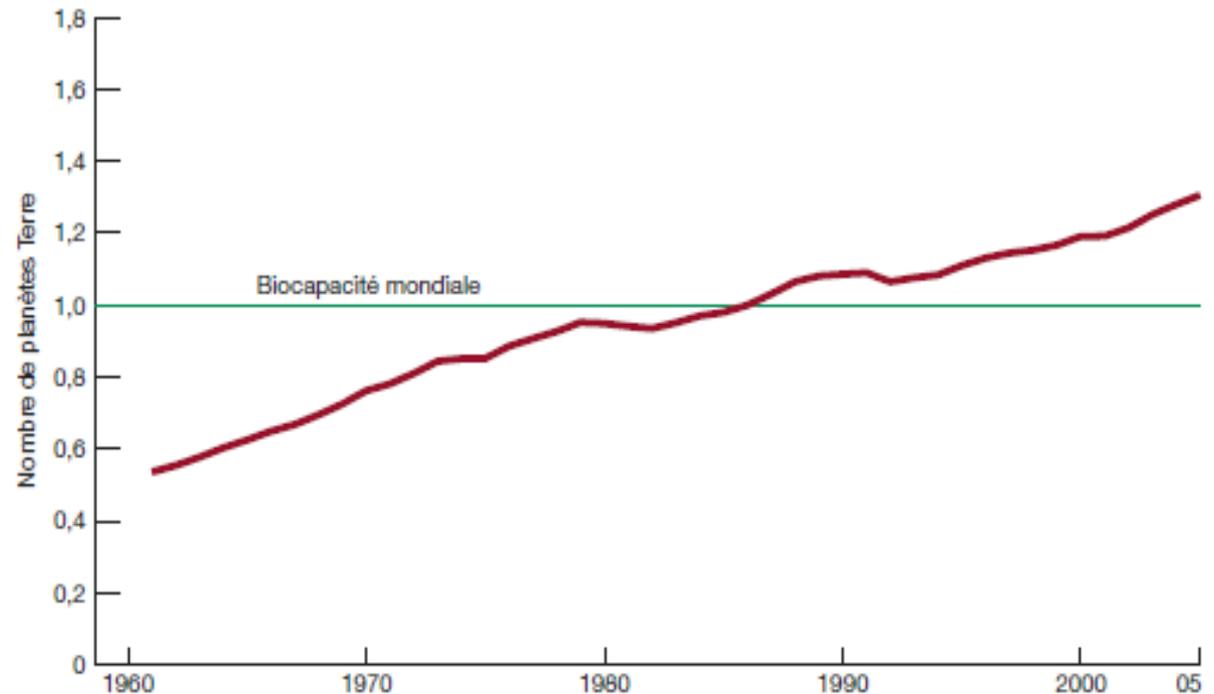
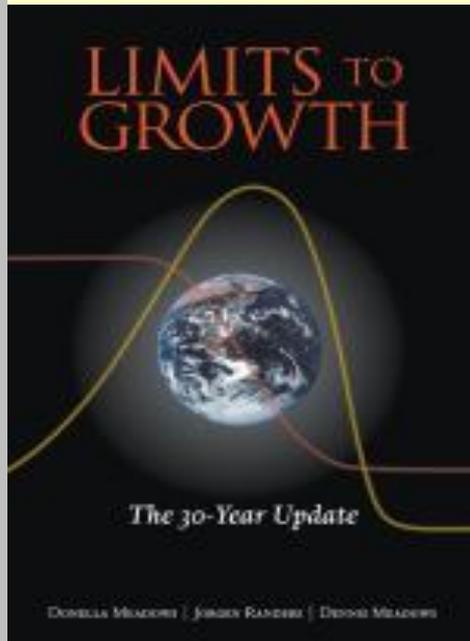
**Gandhi lost and trying to imitate the industrialized societies of the West became the norm. But now the development era is over; way-down and degrowth are coming.**

The idea that a period of post-development, way-down, degrowth, is inevitable has gained visibility and credibility in recent years because of the increasing, concrete and consistent indicators revealing that we are already living beyond the limits of the planet or are very close to reaching them – that we have already entered into a phase of overshoot or that doing so is imminent. For some time now we have heard warnings about the future danger resulting from our destruction of the Earth's environment. Over the past four decades we have continually postponed the moment when we will finally take this danger seriously, but it now seems that this moment *has arrived*.



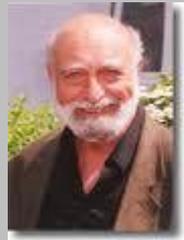
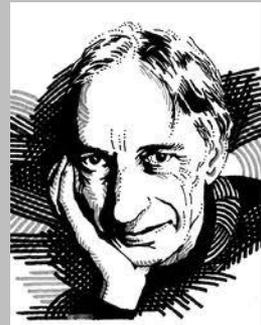
Those who hold this opinion usually refer to information such as the following:

- A review of the Club of Rome report on the limits of growth 30 years later has highlighted that the assessment made at the beginning of the 1970s (that the continuation of the trends dominant at that time would result in a situation of overshooting around the second decade of the 21st century) has now come to pass, even sooner than was foreseen (Meadows *et al*, 2004).
- Calculations of our global ecological footprint indicate that our use of natural resources already exceeded the regenerative capacity of the biosphere in 1985. Since then we have continued consuming these resources nonstop, reaching in 2007 a level of consumption 50% higher than what would be considered sustainable (WWF 2010).



Theoretically, the degrowth approach is based on the bioeconomics of Georgescu-Roegen and the philosophy of Ivan Illich, also incorporating elements from the historical and anthropological critique of development (Rist, Shiva), doctrines of post-development (Rahnema and Bawtree) and other sources.

*The approach is characterized, on the one hand, by the insistence that a situation of overshooting is unsustainable and therefore transitory and, on the other hand, by the understanding that we therefore have to look for answers to social and political problems outside of the development paradigm.* This dual position has led to an open, persistent and sharp criticism of the idea of sustainable development, considering it to be theoretically contradictory and inconsistent [Georgescu-Roegen compared it to a lullaby with strong sedative effects] and, in practical terms, merely an attempt to inject credibility into the old and always deferred promise of economic development: see, for example, the "bestiary" of sustainable development, a permanent section in the French magazine *La décroissance*.



The way to approach the idea of degrowth varies based on our evaluation of how close current levels of population and economic activity are to unsustainability. If it is understood that demographic and economic expansion have already passed their limits, we have already reached unsustainability, and degrowth is not an option that we can choose to follow based on our moral or political preferences, but rather a necessary and unavoidable path. If we believe that demographic and economic expansion is still possible but will not contribute to increasing well-being or a better life, then degrowth can be a moral and political option: “living better with less”. If we understand that demographic and economic expansion has still not led to an overshoot condition but is dangerously close to doing so, then degrowth can be a preventative option, a precautionary measure. The three approaches are present in the reappearance of the ideas of degrowth in recent years. Regarding the first understanding, degrowth is not an option but is something inevitable; for the other two, it is an option that should be chosen because it is desirable and/or fair.



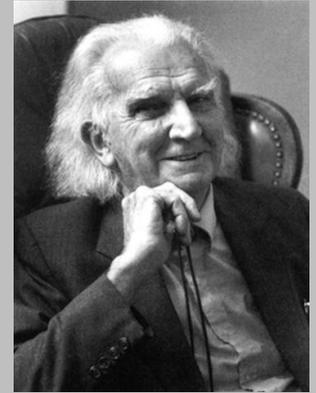
**We could discuss later the empirical basis of the statement that industrial civilization has entered the overshoot phase.**

**The same for the different implications which can be derived from the three meanings of degrowth noted above.**

**Now I'd like to insist that going beyond growth means going beyond development too. 'I forego growth but I retain development' is an appealing but unpractical idea.**

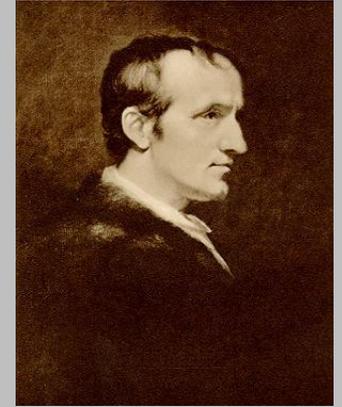
**This idea has sophisticated contemporary versions, as proposed by Boulding, Daly and others. It has ancient roots too: Condorcet and Godwin wrote about it at the end of 18th century.**

**Development without growth is the last card for unlimited progress, for endless humanity's betterment, despite the fact that Earth is finite.**



**“The men therefore who exist when the earth shall refuse itself to a more extended population, will cease to propagate, for they will no longer have any motive, either of error or duty, to induce them. In addition to this they will perhaps be immortal. The whole will be a people of men, and not of children. Generation will not succeed generation, nor truth have in a certain degree to recommence her career at the end of every thirty years. There will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice as it is called, and no government (...) But beside this, there will be no disease, no anguish, no melancholy and no resentment. Every man will seek with ineffable ardour the good of all. Mind will be active and eager, yet never disappointed. Men will see the progressive advancement of virtue and good, and feel that, if things occasionally happen contrary to their hopes, the miscarriage itself was a necessary part of that progress. They will know, that they are members of the chain, that each has his several utility, and they will not feel indifferent to that utility. They will be eager to enquire into the good that already exists, the means by which it was produced, and the greater good that is yet in store. They will never want motives for exertion; for that benefit which a man thoroughly understands and earnestly loves, he cannot refrain from endeavouring to promote.”**

Godwin, W. : *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness*. London, G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1793, pp. 871-2.



No growth, but  
still  
development,  
following  
Godwin (1793)

## 2. *Buen vivir, a minimal introduction*

“Buen vivir” (living well) is an umbrella concept, open to different approaches, susceptible to various and even contradictory meanings.

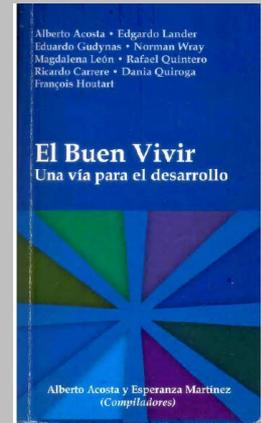
Many of them are indeed contrary to the current development paradigm.

As an alternative development, “an opportunity to collectively build a new regime of development” (A. Acosta y E. Martínez, *El buen vivir: una vía para el desarrollo*, Quito, Abya Yala, 2009, p. 7)

As an alternative *to* development, a term which “is tied to exploitation, marginalization, depredation and dependency”

(F. Huanacuni Mamani, *Buen vivir/vivir bien: Filosofía, políticas, estrategias y experiencias regionales andinas*, Lima, Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas-CAOI, 2010).

But “buen vivir” can even be claimed as a road to development as usual. As president Correa said, as a justification for opening Yasuní Park to oil industry: “I don’t like mining, I don’t like oil, but I dislike much more poverty and deprivation”.



I'll discuss only the ideal meaning of *buen vivir*, as one of the criticisms of development focusing mainly on inequality. In my opinion, living well can be understood as a reformulation and updating of these perspectives.

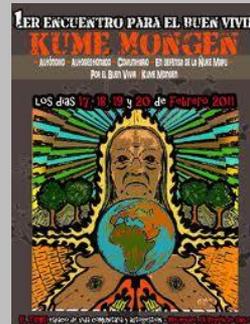
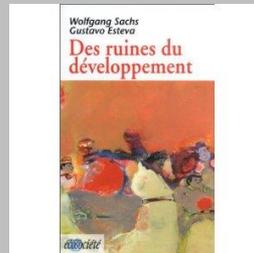
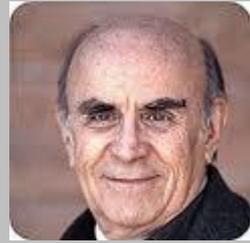
The approaches that I am referring more or less share the following analysis: To participate in the development process is to occupy a competitive niche in global markets. Those who cannot do so become objects of “cooperation for development” or recipients of “humanitarian aid” or simply die of hunger (or perhaps all three things successively, depending on how the geopolitical or global mass media winds are blowing). Exclusion exists on different scales and levels of intensity in different societies, but occurs everywhere. As might be expected given such a panorama, the world is full of multiple experiments in which victims of development are trying to escape this destiny by independently pursuing their own projects for improving their lives. Many of these experiments have had some success; if not, the dimensions of the holocaust associated with exclusion would be even greater than they are. Many are expressed in terms of social conflict and follow a logic of resistance.



The proposals and initiatives that have emerged from this multifaceted resistance are sometimes conceived of as alternatives *to* development and sometimes as alternative *paths* of development. At times they adopt the language of sustainable development; at times they reject such language. These discourses frequently focus on *relocalization, post-development, or cultural diversity*.

The debates in this context are quite interesting, as are the significant differences between the various interpretations.

Here I want to point out certain common characteristics that almost all of these proposals and initiatives have. First, emphasis is placed on the local-regional level as the most appropriate to express resistance to development-globalization and to promote alternatives. Secondly, there is a common insistence on autonomy, both in relation to the market and the state (based either on associations or communities). Finally, they emphasize cultural diversity (as source of knowledge based on experience and “adapted to the particular case”, as the basis for rejecting any model that claims to be universally applicable and as a source that offers a plurality of spaces for a multitude of initiatives and experiments).



***Buen vivir* is a particular case of this line of reasoning:**

**In the version followed here, the nearest to environmentalism, its starting point is looking for an alternative to development, after accepting *the failure of the promise of development*; understanding the current crisis as the “product of a model which is developmentalist, individualistic, predatory, purely materialistic, anthropocentric, etc.” and as “a crisis of life and paradigm”. The failure of the developmentalist model is not due to its inadequate application, but to its inherent contradictions and its unavoidable tendency to generate and increase inequalities: “From the perspective of living well, we, the original indigenous peoples, are questioning the term development and all that it implies; as for our peoples, development has meant the destruction of nature and our communities. The term development is tied to exploitation, marginalization, depredation and dependency; as in the logic of the West, development involves winning at the expense of the other”.**

[quotations from F. Huanacuni Mamani, 2010]



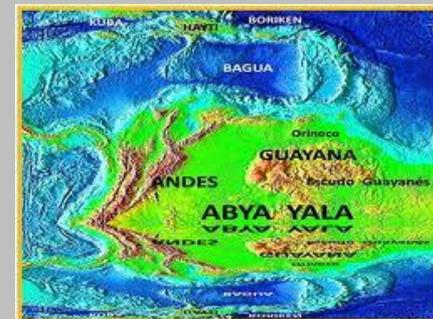
Living well places clear *emphasis on the local-regional*. Its geographic references range from local communities to the Andean region as a whole.

Living well is presented as a project which is *separate from the market and the state*. This separation is expressed in very general terms, as neither capitalist nor communist but instead as a type of communitarian socialism.

The concept of living well is integrated into a specific *cultural identity*. The solutions to the problems of the present from this perspective are not only economic but also cultural, requiring a “return to origins”, to “the natural identity that expresses the values of harmony and balance in community”

As with other movements of community and identity [and with certain variants of environmentalism], living well has some scores to settle with representative democracy and also –in my opinion– a bit of skepticism to add toward the illusions raised by direct or “participatory” democracy.

Living well claims to be *sustainable*. In some way, it seems to suggest that adopting its criteria would almost spontaneously make human society compatible with the environment.



### ***3.The spheres of dialogue: Similarities and potential conflicts between degrowth and buen vivir***

There are, no doubt, certain similar elements, as well as an occasionally matching rhetoric. But in all cases there are potential break lines too.

a) In the construction of the concept of *living well* it is easy to detect the traces of the now long history of the critique of development. In some way, in the process of formulating and refining this concept, indigenous movements in the Andean region seem to be looking for, among other things, paths that will allow them to go beyond the now worn out and unsuccessful development paradigm. This critique is also one of the more explicit starting points for *degrowth*. A common ground for both ideas can be found here.

But reducing environmental costs and reducing social costs are purposes that do not coincide automatically.



**b) The relationship between buen vivir and extractivism should be clarified.**

**Living well is an approach which emerged from an important sector of the new left in South America, of which it can be said, and with good reason, as has Gudynas, that it is no more sensitive to the limits of our planet than other past or present left-wing approaches and that it might even end up settling on an environmentally disastrous neo-extractivism.**

**If the interpretations of living well that I have highlighted here mature and gain in social influence, they could provide a justification for fighting neo-productivist tendencies, but only time will tell if that is the case.**



**c) It is clear that living well, at least based on the reading that I make of it here, has several features of a “culture of sufficiency”. It has something in common, from this perspective, with political-moral variants of European environmentalism that propose “living better with less”.**

**The problem, then, is that the foundation, in the case of living well, is the belief in a “spontaneous ancestral environmentalism”. The rational core of this belief lies, perhaps, in the fact that subsistence societies depend on access to local natural resources to reproduce and, therefore, have a concrete interest in using these resources prudently and not wastefully (in contrast to transnational corporations, which have no local ties of any type and can therefore exploit the resources of a specific place until they are exhausted and then shift their activities to another place where the resources have not yet been depleted). Although this is true, the interest in a prudent and parsimonious use of resources can be undermined by demographic pressures, competition (or lack of competition) with other groups, desire for expansion or domination, environmental change, technological innovation, etc., and no culture offers secure and infallible protection against such conditions.**

**All that seems to be one variant, with “Rousseauian aspects”, of an approach which has recently attained a significant level of recognition: the idea that peoples previously defined as “primitive” or “premodern” by Eurocentric social science (based on the prejudices of colonialism) have actually had value systems that are less oriented toward the domination and transformation of nature, along with very specific forms of knowledge regarding their local ecosystems. In other words, these are cultures which are more respectful of the environment, cultures which are more sustainable.**

**I suspect that the identification between “premodern” and “sustainable” that can be found today in many idealized descriptions of indigenous cultures is a mirror-image of Eurocentric prejudices. It would be much more realistic to recognize that the plurality of examples and experiences is almost endless.**



#### d) Lessons from the past and the countryside as a refuge

Current debates about the collapse of ancient civilisations, the “prosperous degrowth” ideas, and the ancestrals referents of living well are related in several ways.

Questions arise, for example, over whether the collapse of the great “global cities” of the contemporary world will have beneficial or harmful effects on the half of humanity that lives in subsistence economies, outside of globalized markets and state mechanisms of social intervention.

Some advocates for an alternative globalization have already responded that the effects will surely be beneficial, easing the pressure on the world’s natural resources caused by the power centers of the globalized economy, and therefore making local resources more accessible to local populations. In the same way that the collapse of Rome probably meant little for the broad peasant base of the empire, possibly even permitting an improvement in material conditions in some places, the collapse of modern capitalism, while disastrous for the core urban areas, would only slightly alter the lives of much of humanity (possibly making their lives less difficult).

The countryside as a refuge in times of crisis is an old formula, which has been turned to on many occasions throughout history. However, at present, a large part of the half of the world living outside of markets and state lives in the major cities of the Third World. These *megalopolises* are essentially monstrous products of development, and it is unclear how their inhabitants would be able to subsist outside of it. The idea of a massive return to the countryside would be extremely problematic given current population figures. But in the end, who knows....



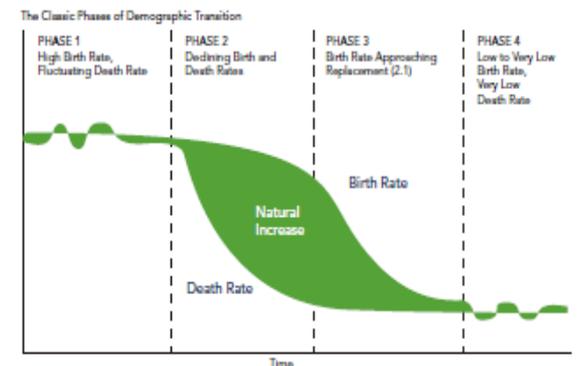
## e) The population issue

How might successful post-development or degrowth solutions be applied to adequately maintain a population of 9 or 10 billion persons? And, if such solutions are not applicable to such a population: How can the transition to a significantly smaller population be relatively benign?

It is not possible to avoid these questions, however uncomfortable they may be. In a world with nine billion inhabitants there will be around 0.16 hectares of cultivatable land per person. This implies serious problems, and we can expect no miracle solutions from either technological innovation or social justice.

Approaches that criticize modernization, such as degrowth and living well, should not assume that the *demographic transition* will avoid overpopulation, because demographic transition is the population doctrine of the development paradigm itself. To critique development but accept the assumptions of the demographic transition is logically incoherent.

Both living well and degrowth doctrines usually ignore or deny this question.

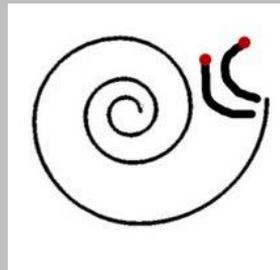


There are many other points to discuss. For example:

Degrowth and buen vivir will bring with them **re-localization** and, consequently, a relative strengthening of **community**. It immediately raises the discussion about the pros and cons: greater solidarity but also greater control over the individual, greater opportunities for grassroots democracy but also for despotism, greater defense against alienation but a loss of space for diversity. All that has been the subject of conflicting and endless analyses from a sociological perspective.

Degrowth and buen vivir assume the end of global unified systems. And the “natural” result of the crisis of a centralized structure is neither one of general improvement or general decline; instead it is one of diversification.

I think, in summary, that it would be wise not to rush to judgment, leaving the answer to await the results of a more detailed analysis and a dialogue which addresses all the important nuances.



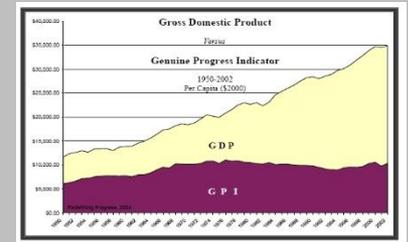
## 4. How to proceed

To discuss social issues, measure wellbeing, not growth  
(e.g. Genuine Progress Indicator)

To discuss sustainable wellbeing, measure ecological  
balance, not growth trends (e.g. Happy Planet Index)

To perceive social change, think about postcarbon  
transition, not about more development

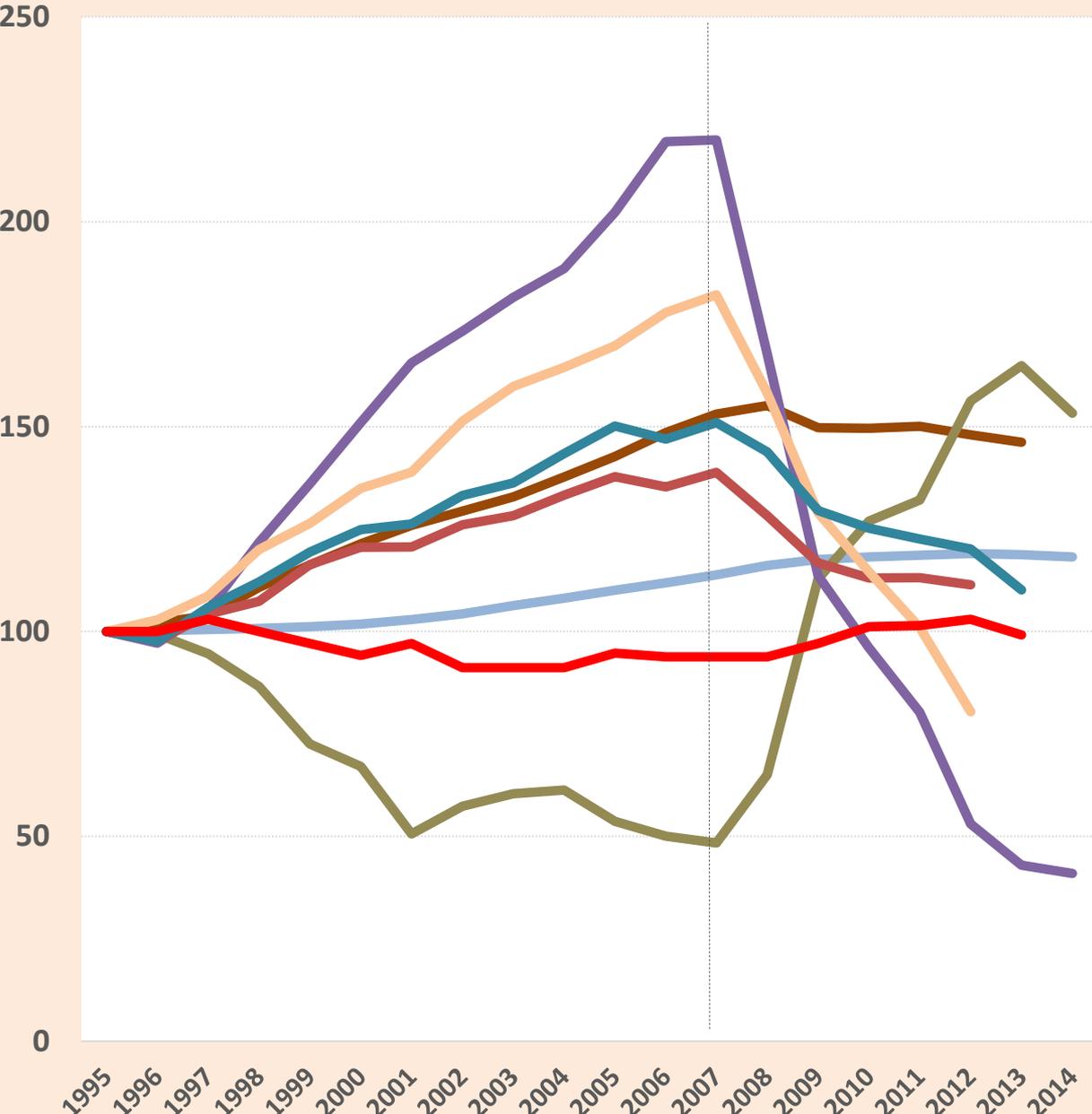
Reframing a praise of austerity, exploring the hidden links  
between austerity and wellbeing: degrowth is going to be  
painful; not as painful, however, as still new waves of  
growth



**The transition to a post-carbon society is imposed on us by the need to mitigate and adapt to climate change and the increasing cost and scarcity of oil and natural gas, or by complex combinations of both causes. There are good reasons to believe the transition is inevitable: a course of social change determined by natural conditions, or rather, the limits of the planet.**



# Growth and degrowth in Spain: Relative trajectories of the economy, society, and the environment 1995-2014 (1995 = 100)



- Population
- Real GDP
- Unemployment
- Cement consumption
- Greenhouse gas emissions
- National Material Consumption
- Fossil fuel consumption
- Inequality (Gini coefficient)

Sources: Eurostat, Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE), Ministry of Industry, Energy and Tourism, Spanish Cement Manufacturers Association (Oficemen), own elaboration.

The following observations can be made:

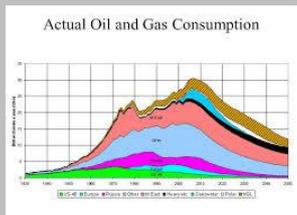
Phenomena, which, by definition, pertain to the transition to a post-carbon society, are present, specifically, a downward trend in the use of fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions. This trend must form the basis of any post-carbon transition, regardless of the economic, social and political forms it takes.

There are also phenomena associated with degrowth (the reduction of GDP, material throughput and even the population), raising the question of whether the post-carbon transition and degrowth go together. Are they perhaps the same thing? Does one imply the other? Or is this a contingent and perhaps transient association?

Finally, there is data that suggests a severe erosion of social cohesion, most notably the sharp increase in unemployment and rising inequality. Here, the unknown is the conditions—if they exist—under which a post-carbon transition could occur without coinciding with a major social crisis. Are smooth transitions possible? Or must they be accompanied by a social crisis?

To summarise, the data indicates that in Spain, from 2007 to the present, decarbonisation (the reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions) has coincided with economic stagnation and an acute—but not extreme—social and political crisis, raising the issue of whether this must always be the case.



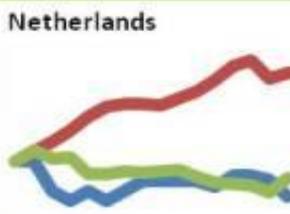
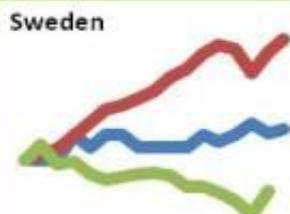
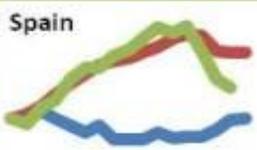


A comparative analysis with other countries, based on a simplified model with just three indicators (GDP for the economic dynamic, greenhouse gases for the use of fossil fuels, and the Gini coefficient to measure inequality and hence social cohesion), suggests more than one possible trajectories: the coincidence between decarbonisation and recession does not always arise, or at least thus far. The results, summarised in the following Graph, offer a number of insights. Firstly, in some countries, a sustained reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions appears to be associated with a relatively higher capacity to recover from the economic crisis (Sweden and Germany), while in others (Spain, Italy and Greece) relative decarbonisation is closely linked to recession. This suggests there may be certain margins—broad and albeit most certainly temporary—for ecological modernisation, and that an in-depth exploration of the issue may be instructive. Secondly, there is no regular pattern associating trends in inequality to changes in GDP or CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, suggesting that certain measures aiming to promote or maintain social cohesion could be introduced in any economic or ecological context (at least in the absence of extreme scarcity).

Anyway, there appears to be no common pattern when it comes to the relationship between the three dimensions under consideration (economy, inequality and environmental pressure).

# Economic, social, and environmental trajectories do not seem correlated

Relative Trends in Inequality, Wealth and Environmental Impact 1995–2011



Gini index ———

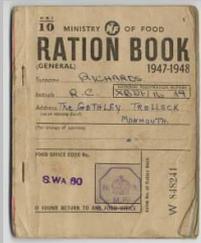
Greenhouse gas emissions ———

Real GDP per capita ———

It does not seem possible to establish a common pattern for all the cases for the relationship between the three dimensions.

- Ecological modernisation appears to be associated with a shorter and milder recession.
- Ecological modernisation and the reduced impact of the recession appear to be associated with a higher level of wealth.
- The trends of the distribution of income appear to follow their own logic for each of the countries.

As is almost always the case in history, the paths of degrowth promise to be uncertain, confusing and diverse



**All that leaves the question of whether the post-carbon transition must necessarily imply economic recession, as has been the case since 2007.**

**Given the historically close relationship between economic growth and energy consumption, given that their eventual decoupling has limits that cannot be overcome, and given the absence of similarly abundant, concentrated, versatile and economic alternatives to fossil fuels at present, in principle, the answer must be affirmative: the post-carbon transition and economic growth are largely incompatible. However, how we conceive this incompatibility depends on our perceptions of the contribution made by GDP growth to well-being.**



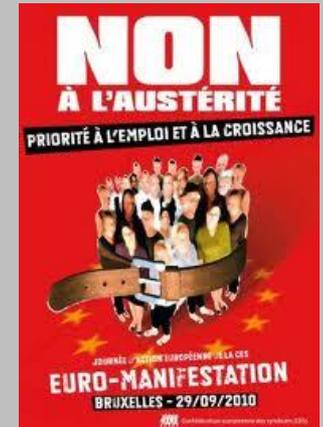
**In my opinion, the particularly convulsive nature of the crisis that began in 2007 and the acute imbalances of the preceding period of expansion dating back to 1995 show that, in terms of its contribution to well-being, GDP growth has reached its limits. As Daly (2014) notes, growth has now become uneconomic. Calculations of the Genuine Progress Indicator for the wealthiest countries show the social and environmental costs of increasing GDP have outstripped the associated benefits for quite some time, with the concomitant loss in net well-being. It has been calculated that, in terms of the global economy, GDP growth and increasing well-being exhibit a strong correlation until \$7,000 per capita, tending to stagnate above this level (Kubiszewski et al. 2013). The Happy Planet Index, shows that the greatest balance between life satisfaction and environmental costs is not found in the wealthiest or poorest countries (NEF 2012). These new indicators, which have been devised by ecological economists, attempt to put into practice the philosophical foundations laid by Illich (2004), who, quite some time ago, argued that development tends to reach a point at which it becomes counter-productive.**



It is impossible to make predictions in this respect. By studying the present, we can glimpse the features of a context that favours a sudden collapse in the midst of repeatedly frustrated illusions of “recoveries”. In principle, this scenario would appear in no way favourable to a conscious and controlled change, and much less to a prosperous way down or happy degrowth. The belief that the solution to all our social problems begins with recovering strong GDP growth is the only point on which all the current economic and political actors in Europe, right and left, appear to coincide, a consensus which anchors politics to a space that abounds in risk.

Indeed, recent years have seen the emergence of a consensus I believe to be extremely deceiving, one in which austerity is viewed as bad and can be rejected, while growth is good and desirable. It is a consensus that identifies austerity with pay cuts and the loss of jobs and social rights, instead of renouncing the superfluous in order to sustain and guarantee the necessary, a consensus which, against all the evidence of the last two or three decades, views growth as the only solution to unemployment, precariousness and the impoverishment of workers. This consensus, in its own right, constitutes a powerful obstacle to a smooth post-carbon transition that is able to avoid, if possible, a catastrophic collapse.

Given industrial society is now in, or is extremely close to, a state of overshoot, given that this inevitably implies the advent of a historical era that will be defined by the way down, and given that this way down implies degrowing to a level determined by the carrying capacity of the planet, the collective and positive reconstruction of austerity is much more important than *ad nauseam* repetitions of a magical faith in unlimited growth on a finite planet.

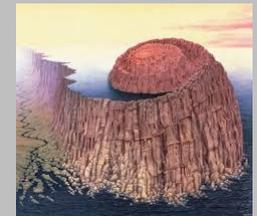


**But what is a “positive reconstruction of austerity”? It is an idea that is open to multiple interpretations and is not subject to a single model, meaning it would be of limited use to give a categorical answer. However, drawing on existing ideas, I believe that for a path of genuine progress that results in a smooth way down, it would be necessary to reflect on at least three issues:**

**– A reform of the system for the production and distribution of goods and services that deglobalises and decelerates (smaller, slower, more local) to levels compatible with the carrying capacity of the Earth. Lifestyle changes, regardless of whether they are voluntary, are not sufficient on their own. Under the current system of production, even an ecologically conscious austerity would be unsustainable.**

**- A transition towards lifestyles based more on spatial proximity between the different spheres of life and the adoption of more balanced diets in terms of composition, quantity and origin, as well as management that is more conducive to the sustainability of existing housing stock and the social construction of convivial institutions.**

**- The definition and application of more egalitarian rules for the distribution of wealth and labour in an attempt to prevent the breakdown of social cohesion will entail the frustration of economic expectations, culminating in large-scale outbreaks of disorder and social disorganisation.**



# Reframing a praise of austerity...

*From Heraclitus...*

**“The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of Justice, will find him out”**

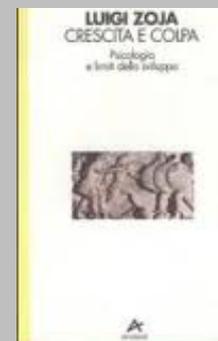
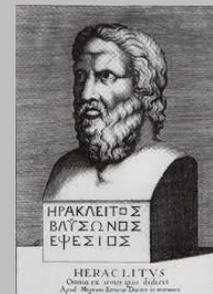
*...to Berlinguer*

**“under the current conditions it is impossible to imagine a true and effective fight for a better society without beginning from the essential requirement of austerity”**

It would be necessary to explore the hidden links between austerity and wellbeing, advocating an (Epicurean) notion of austerity that:

- Stands up to those who seek to cut back everything that is not strictly necessary: we already have seen what a society in which individuals receive only what is strictly necessary to survive looks like, and nobody wants to go there: it is a concentration camp.
- Dispenses with statues and does not spend a single penny on crowns: the correct management of public goods will tend to imply the suppression of unnecessary expenses.

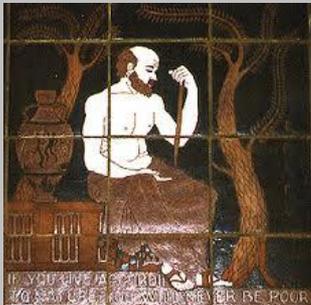
These conditions define a vast realm for exploration. Austerity is not a return to living in caves (or a march towards the concentration camp) but the defence of the refinement of civilised life in the face of the excess by which it is threatened. Austerity is about not accepting unnecessary penalisation as inevitable, it is not about smiling in the face of punishment from an abusive power, but recognising that perhaps, regardless of whether we have been deceived, we have been living beyond our means. Austerity is about identifying and systematically suppressing in an orderly and organised manner where possible, the “statues” that deform, scar and humiliate our society.



# Desires, according to Epicurus

**Epicurus says that there are three types of desires:**

- there are desires that are natural and necessary (such as drinking water to quench our thirst);**
- there are desires that are natural but not necessary (such as eating well cooked food, since although eating is a natural requirement, eating well is merely a culturally refined way of satisfying this natural requirement);**
- and there are desires that are neither natural nor necessary (such as crowns or erecting statues).**



Historians of philosophy have interpreted this passage in different ways. I would like to point out here that perhaps it is not philologically correct, however this is not important: the idea is merely to suggest that the realm of sufficiency (which is also the realm of sustainability and the austerity of wellbeing) is of desires that are natural but not necessary.

## Many mediations, of course...



“Stand a little out of my sun”

Diogenes of Synope

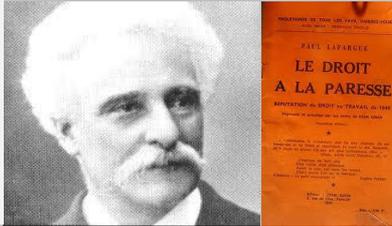


“Padre carissimo, come si può chiamare tesoro, dov'è tanta povertà e mancamento di quelle cose che bisognano? Qui non è tovaglia, né coltello, né tagliere, né scodella, né casa, né mensa, né fante, né fancella”. Disse allora santo Francesco: “E questo è quello che io reputo grande tesoro, ove non è cosa ni una apparecchiata per industria umana; ma ciò che ci è, si è apparecchiato dalla provvidenza divina, siccome si vede manifestamente nel pane accattato, nella mensa di pietra così bella e nella fonte così chiara”.

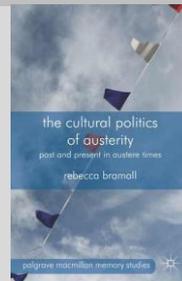
(I Fioretti di San Francesco)

“... working but three hours a day, reserving the rest of the day and night for leisure and feasting”

Paul Lafargue



And taking also into account frames of memory, cultural contexts, and imagined futures. (Look, for instance, at the programme *Austerity Futures? Imagining and Materialising the Future in an 'Age of Austerity'*)



“Today, austerity is not merely an instrument of political economy that must be used to overcome a temporary, interim, difficulty, to permit the recovery and restoration of the old social and economic mechanisms. This is how it is conceived and presented by the dominant groups and conservative political forces. In contrast, for us, austerity is the means to extirpate and lay the foundations to overcome a system that has entered into a structural and deeply-rooted crisis, whose distinctive features are profligacy and waste, the exaltation of specificities and the most acute individualisms of the most reckless consumerism. Austerity stands for rigour, efficiency and seriousness, as well as justice, or rather, the opposite of all we have known and suffered until now, which has led us to this severe crisis whose damage has been building up for years, being apparent today [...] in all its dramatic scope”

“Austerity is [...] an effective struggle against current circumstances, against the spontaneous development of events, and, at the same time, the premise and material condition to effect change.

Today's environmentalists:

- small is beautiful
- enough is better
- voluntary simplicity
- downshifting
- *objecteurs de croissance...*

