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The Degrowth Movement and Crime Prevention

Vincenzo Ruggiero

Abstract

Critics of market economies are found among academics, social movements and alliances involving both. One such alliance is constituted by what is known as the degrowth movement, whose analyses of the dysfunctional effects of prevalent economic arrangements and principles relate (implicitly or explicitly) to crime prevention strategies. After briefly examining the concerns of classical theorists such as Karl Marx and Max Weber about infinite growth and its environmental impact, this paper tries to uncover the criminological implications of degrowth and to hypothesize how its strategies can contribute to the reduction and/or prevention of criminal activity.

Introduction

Contemporary market economies, in order to reproduce themselves culturally and structurally, are forced to innovate, expand, grow and accelerate. This relentless dynamism alters the way in which people are situated in the world, it affects their body, their mental dispositions and their relationship with time and space (Rosa, 2019). **The degrowth movement discards this dynamism and rejects prevailing economic doctrines that revolve around relationships among humans rather than on those between humans, non-humans and their natural world.**

Economic acceleration, as aimless and endless compulsion, provokes environmental, social and psychological crises, distressing the bonds we establish with nature, as well as with human and non-human beings. Finding ways of repairing these bonds is one of the tasks of a 'sociology of the good life', also advocated by promoters of degrowth thinking and action.

In a contemporary rendition of this Aristotelian concept, *the good life* can be measured through the quality of our relationship with the world, the establishment of a 'vibrating wire' and a high degree of 'resonance' (ibid) between our needs, those of others and the environment that allows us to coexist and which requires, in turn, that we allow its continued existence.

Criminology has addressed our relationships with the environment and non-human beings, particularly green criminology, although examples of similar concerns are also found in the research areas of corporate and organized crime. An examination of the arguments and strategies of the degrowth movement can point to crucial preventative aspects that can be brought to bear in criminological research and the elaboration of policies.

The following pages set off with a brief journey through the thought of Marx and Weber in relation to economic development and the environment, to then sketch the history of the degrowth movement and its propositions. The paper then compares such propositions with criminological considerations around crime prevention, noting the strong convergences between the two. Throughout, it is assumed that criminologists too are engaged in the construction of 'a

sociology of the good life', or that at least they are attempting to develop a 'transformative theory of the Good and human flourishing' (Raymen, 2019: 134).

Metabolic rifts and natural economies

When looking at Marxist analysis of economic growth, it is easy to experience a feeling of disorientation. Marx's writings, for instance, contain laudatory pages of England's mission in India, which destroyed and regenerated the country at the same time. Although describing the colonialists as repelling and greedy hypocrites, Marx rejoices at the dissolution of the traditional social arrangements they cause, bringing what he regards as the only social revolution Asia has ever known. Economic growth brought by the English, in brief, is said to contribute to the demolition of a subsistence economy upon which 'semi-barbaric and semi-civilised small communities had survived for centuries' (Marx, 1960: 61). Those 'idyllic villages', Marx argues, are the solid basis of Oriental despotism, inhabited by docile people prone to superstition, stripped of any historic energy. 'We do not have to forget that these communities were contaminated by caste divisions and slavery, they alimanted a degrading cult for nature, exemplified by the fact that humans, the lords of nature, bowed in adoration of a monkey or a cow' (ibid).

Growth enjoys praise for propelling industry and creating an industrial working class, that is a class destined to lead the ultimate, fateful social revolution. Marx and Engels (1952) also remark that nature has been revolutionized by modern industry, putting to an end childish attitudes towards the earth and sluggish peasant economies. They reject 'reactionary sentimentalism about nature which [seek] to reestablish old feudal relations of hierarchy' (Foster, 2000: 125).

In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, we find totally different arguments. Here, Marx elaborates the concept of the alienation of labour, focusing on the estrangement of workers from their productive activity, from the labour process, each other and, finally, from nature. Humans live from nature, he remarks, in the sense that nature is in their body, and they 'must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if they are not to die. To say that human physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for humans are part of nature' (Marx, 1974: 328). Marx dwells on the naturalism of humans and the humanism of nature, contrasted to a world of universal prostitution of workers and universal pollution of large cities, where dead matter in the form of money has come to dominate over human needs and self-development.

Marx's materialist analysis of nature revolves around the concept of metabolism, that is the material exchange that guides the processes of biological growth and decay. The labour process is described as a form of regulation and control of the environment, a process that encounters an irreparable rift. Metabolic rift refers to the relationship between town and country, human beings and the earth, a fracture that manifests itself in increasing environmental degradation. In volume 3 of *Capital*, the large landowners are deemed responsible of reducing rural labour and pushing workers to industrial conurbations, in this way producing 'conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by

the natural laws of life itself' (Marx, 1976: 949-50). The workers and the soil, namely the original sources of all wealth, are simultaneously robbed. Attention is also paid to the 'alienation of fish': 'The essence of the freshwater fish is the water of a river. But the latter ceases to be the essence of the fish as soon as the river is made to serve industry, which deprives the fish of its medium of existence' (Marx and Engels, 1975: 58).

Some commentators detect serious limitations in the way both Marx and Engels consider the development of productive forces, while others emphasize the contemporary significance of their ecological critique of capitalism. A third position states that Marx and Engels' discussion of ecological issues is incomplete and dated, but is still a good starting point for the current time (Löwy, 2017).

Max Weber detects an element of substantive irrationality in the economic order, determined by attempts to make short-term speculative profit, described as 'pure gambling interest' (Weber, 1978: 40). A notion of 'limit' can be found in his analysis of the friction between mechanisms of development and human and natural aspects of collective life. Weber contends that social beings are creatures of habit, strongly motivated by their material and ideal interests to circumvent conventional rules and legal norms. In his analysis, markets are antithetic to all other communities, because the latter, not the former, presuppose 'brotherhood' among people. Habit in market activity, in brief, leads to increasing lack of solidarity and neglect of the consequences of economic initiative as a whole. Natural limits to production are emphasized in Weber's description of the irresistible force of machines, which seems destined to determine human lives until the last ton of fossil fuel is burnt (Weber, 1930). In his opinion, the 'balance sheet' of natural resources is of crucial importance in the history of human development (Weber, 1978; Foster, 1999).

When discussing alternative development, Weber mentions the *oikos* as a collective natural economy, where members render fixed personal services that meet the material needs of the community. Here, goods and services are not produced for the market but for collective self-sufficiency. True, such a collective economy may be a 'manorial or royal household', but it may also coincide with modern cooperatives 'run on a direct democratic basis' (Weber, 1978:720).

In sum, Marx and Weber cannot be accused of adopting a form of *human exemptionalism*, according to which humans, supported by increasingly sophisticated and powerful technologies, are exempt from natural or environmental influences and restraints (Foster and Holleman, 2012). In this sense, both Marx and Weber can be regarded as good progenitors, or at least 'adoptive parents', of the degrowth movement.

Shallow and deep ecology

The debate around degrowth gathered momentum in France, Italy and Spain in the 1970s, during the course of campaigns for the defence of the earth against the construction of nuclear power stations, new railways requiring the perforation of mountains and new roads gutting the countryside. When the work of Serge Latouche started to circulate, therefore, degrowth could already count on the support of movements that would help it become a movement in its own right. Latouche (1986; 1993; 1996; 2005; 2010) began questioning the need for

development while establishing the principles of what he described as anti-economics. He hypothesized what post-development would look like while critiquing all attempts by the West to impose their economic doctrines on developing countries. He also elaborated the main stages of a 'serene' process that would guide degrowth. In 2005, he provided a theoretical framework underpinning his 'heretic' proposals with an analysis of how the economy (and economic thought) had been 'invented'.

Latouche's thought echoed the animated discussion that took place between 'shallow' and 'deep' ecologists (Ruggiero, 2001). The former assumed that the technology that is destroying the earth may also rescue it, while the latter believed that survival could only be achieved if fundamental changes in values and patterns of production and consumption were effected. Shallow ecologists relied on the view that human beings are separate from one another and from the natural world. By contrast, deep ecologists embraced a holistic outlook, whereby 'humans are interconnected with each other and constantly in relationship with everything around them, part of the flow of energy, the web of life' (Palmer, 1997: 16).

On the background of this debate, which *mutatis mutandi* continues today, a notion of 'catastrophe threshold' can be detected which is associated with the varying perceptions of the utility brought by risky behaviour. The perception of risk and catastrophe is not only based on scientifically shared calculus, but is also heavily dependent on subjectivity. In sum, environmental issues become 'politicized' because society no longer runs risks in pursuit of what is necessary, but of what is superfluous (Luhman, 1996). Politicization, in turn, implies that the identification of the threshold of catastrophe is dependent on who is likely to earn advantages from risky behaviour. Those who feel that risk will bring advantages to others rather than themselves will move the threshold accordingly. In brief, every perception of catastrophe and risk varies according to one's capacity to make choices: some individuals and groups make choices while others may just suffer their outcomes.

Contemporary debates engage 'green growth' versus degrowth. The former, among other things, advocates that an extra 15.2 per cent of global GDP should be invested annually in a programme of renewable energy provision. This would de-couple economic growth from fossil-fuel consumption. The latter notes that such de-coupling would lead to further outsourcing of production, with the result that developed countries would capture value, while emerging economies would be deemed responsible for emissions (Burton and Somerville, 2019). Furthermore, present level of production-consumption, it is argued, require increasingly scarcer materials whose extraction entails destruction of ecosystems and livelihoods across the globe. Radical reduction of emissions, in brief, requires a 'global economy that is considerably smaller in material terms' (ibid: 100).

Latouche's radical work on the 'invention of economics' locates the author in the area populated by scholars striving to explain the archeology of human sciences (Foucault, 1994), understand how such sciences started to claim a natural origin (Schabas, 2007) or the way in which they began to equate economic activity to calm nobility (Hirschman, 1977). Together, these scholars inspired critical analyses of the history of economics and of its effort to establish itself as a scientifically reliable discipline (Ruggiero, 2013) and, at the same time,

as 'a domain of professional experts unknowable to common people' (Kallis et al, 2018: 294). Latouche might have been influenced by utopians such as Thomas More (1997: 127), who detected a conspiracy on the part of the wealthy, in the 'devices and all means and crafts' that help them 'keep safely without fear of losing what they have unjustly gathered together'. Some of his inspiration may have also been derived from Galbraith (1987: 2-3), who elegantly argued that:

'In nearly all economic history most people have been poor and a comparative few have been rich. Accordingly, there has been a compelling need to explain why this is so – and, alas, to tell why it should be so' (Galbraith, 1987: 2-3).

As we have seen, the degrowth movement is sceptical about the laws established by economics, because these mainly focus on relationships among humans rather than on those between humans and their natural world (Buck, 2019). The alleged superiority of humans to nature, it is contended, is only an expression of the hierarchical nature of the relationships between humans. **The reverse is also true: the alleged superiority of some humans reflects the hierarchical character of the relationship the humans establish with nature** (Bookchin, 1980; Daly, 2014). The degrowth movement embraces this line of thought when it criticizes 'green growth' for failing to consider the radical reorganization of society that ecological and social sustainability would require.

Growth without prosperity

Criticism of growth and its indicators includes the abandonment of formal frameworks centred on 'utility', which is commonly associated with individual fulfilled desires and the happiness achieved through income and consumption. Growth-mania, as described by Sen (2015: xliii), takes the forms of regarding 'economic growth to be important in itself rather than seeing it in terms of the opportunity it provides for enhancing people's life'. The human development approach, in response, shifts the focus from the production of inanimate objects to the quality and richness of human lives. Sen calls for the removal of 'the various hindrances that restrain and restrict human lives, and prevent their blossoming' (ibid: 153). Growth, in other words, should aim at human development.

In a more radical approach, direct challenges are launched against the current obsession with growth: 'enough is enough'. 'To say that my aim in life is to make more and more money is like saying that my aim in eating is to get fatter and fatter' (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012: 5). The prosperity of a country, from this perspective, cannot be narrowly measured through the amount of money available to a given number of individuals, but needs to be associated with how resources are distributed, how people live, their degree of participation in the civic and political arena, their capacity to function, to make choices and control their outcomes (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993).

Obsession with growth offers little choice. Power plants emit heavy metals that harm humans, animals and plants; factory farms produce more sewage than the entire human population; logging causes biodiversity loss, and so on. These environmental externalities are not included in the cost of production, lest the

price of what is being produced would be too high. We face what economists term 'passive subsidy': we purchase goods and services that are being subsidized by all of the people who get sick or die from environmental externalities (Scorse, 2010).

'Passive subsidy' does not feature in the measurement of economic growth, which looks at the increase in the total market value of all goods and services being produced and exchanged. Such measurement is commonly conducted through the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), a conventional statistical indicator, a technical magic index that is expected to facilitate legibility of unfathomable economic conditions. This magic number, however, increases not only with the growing circulation of commodities and services valued as 'goods', but also with expenditure for and exchange of 'bads', such as illegal drugs, prostitution, bribes, protection rackets, prisons, and disasters such as oil spills. For instance, after the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989, the oil spill was turned into net gain, because the funds spent in repairing the damage boosted the GDP. Similarly, medical expenses are also computed, giving the impression that societies invest in health rather than being afflicted by illness. Moreover, 'GDP does not count valuable unpaid work for subsistence or caretaking and ignores enjoyment of the commons' (Kallis et al, 2018: 295). In brief, while large portions of human activity cannot be quantified in monetary terms, an index that fails to incorporate environmental degradation, on the one hand, and leisure time, on the other, ends up depicting growth without prosperity.

When in 1945 the GDP became an internationally accepted indicator, it more realistically signaled the wellbeing of some sectors of advanced economies, reflecting the rate of exploitation imposed on developing ones. The very notion of economic growth established hierarchies, designated dominant and subservient countries, establishing the rights of some to access the resources of others. For this reason,

'Degrowth is not only about downscaling energy and resource use, but also about decolonizing the social imaginary and liberating public debate from prevalent discourses couched in economic terms' (ibid).

Growth, in sum, hides the strengthening of hierarchies, the establishment of perpetually changing forms of colonization and incessant environmental degradation (Kallis et al, 2020; Whyte, 2020).

Prosperity without growth

The case for degrowth finds expression in some theoretical and practical suggestions that hinge on notions of stability and prosperity without growth. The following is a cursory journey through such notions and their practical implications.

Wellbeing can be achieved with lower throughput, namely the energy and resource flows in and out of an economy. Climate mitigation would be unthinkable without such reduction, while wellbeing does not depend on the levels of production and consumption that require escalating use of energy and resources. Wellbeing as genuine progress depends on healthy environments, social equity, reduced working time and enjoyment of non-material relational

goods. Growth, on the contrary, implies alienated work relationships, lack of decision-making power for most, and uncertainty or frustration with respect to the quality and quantity of goods to be produced and their purpose. The degrowth movement would contend that the quality of life improves when work is guided by creative processes controlled by those who perform it, and when it is aimed at the realization of collectively useful and shareable items. As Rosa (2019) suggests, human beings perform activities happily and joyfully when said activities contain within themselves the ultimate objective that defines them. It could be added that happiness and joy increase when planning and execution are performed by the same persons, who choose the final use of what they produce and their beneficiaries. Baking bread or chopping wood can in this sense be immensely satisfying experiences (ibid).

Ecosocialism is one of the terms used for this radically alternative model of production (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson, 2020), a term that perhaps tries to avert criticism of 'real socialism', which is far from embracing reduction of throughput and care for the environment. Ecosocialism aims at shortening the distance between producers and consumers, and at regionalizing economic structures. It is also devoted to expanding the life span of the objects being produced, which could be a response to planned obsolescence implicit in economies of waste. In this respect, see how from the current economic logic goods are designed to break so they can be replaced; similarly, technologies are designed to fail in order to boost substitutions and upgrades: maintenance and repair, in sum, are no longer desired (Appadurai and Alexander, 2020).

The degrowth movement suggests that organizations need to be embedded in communities, where collective ownership takes the form of cooperatives, commons and community-run aggregations. Inequality will be fought through progressive taxation, the establishment of minimum and maximum income and wealth levels. Policies are expected to limit the environmental throughput and 'redirect technological change to increase resource efficiency rather than labour productivity' (Kallis et al, 2018: 299). Technology, on the other hand, should be shared, made convivial.

According to more specific suggestions, environmentally damaging industries should not be subsidized but left to fail through the competitive market mechanisms that they officially celebrate: let the miraculous invisible hand do the trick. Instead of offering public money to fossil fuel companies, airlines and cruise firms, or bailing out corporations and banks, 'we urge the establishment of basic care incomes that will help people and communities to reconstruct their lives and livelihoods' (Kallis et al, 2020: xiii). In a definition that sums up the degrowth project, commoning is described as 'the process through which people collaboratively create, sustain, and enjoy shared resources via communication, regulation, mutual support, conflict negotiation and experimentation' (ibid: 17).

Promoters of degrowth are aware of the tentative nature of their proposals, and to a certain extent acknowledge that they may sound utopian, in the sense that there is no 'topos' were those proposals are fully implemented (ibid: 308). Nevertheless, they look with interest at the revaluation of non-Western traditions that ignore the growth imperative and that they find in Zapatista projects in Mexico, in Ubuntu values in South Africa, in radical ecological democracy in India and in the ideas of 'buen vivir' in Latin America (Latouche, 2010; D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis, 2014). In sum, their utopianism is anchored to

potential transition pathways that, while freeing imagination, may lead to initially unimagined change. But a more detailed account of their programme would divert this paper from its main objective, namely the criminological relevance of degrowth.

Degrowth and the crimes of the powerful

The nexus degrowth-criminology is not immediately evident, unless we focus on the variable harm that runs through both. In this respect, it should be borne in mind that harm as a category has long been among the concerns of criminological thinking, as we find in Beccaria, Ferri, Durkheim, Sutherland, Becker, Hulsman, Christie and others. The degrowth movement, in its turn, is adamant in denouncing how the relentless pursuit of growth generates harm to the environment while producing a variety of social ills. In brief, there are arguments in the degrowth literature that lead straight into the analytical arena of environmental crime and the crimes of the powerful.

Environmentally damaging activities analyzed by criminologists include the illegal disposal of toxic waste, the financial implications of green crimes, the commodification and destruction of wildlife, biodiversity and extinction, legal or illegal activities affecting the climate, land-grabbing by corporations, the costs in human and nonhuman lives of the extraction of minerals, intrusion in natural habitats that release novel viruses into the human domain, the killing of environmental campaigners and much more (South and Brisman, 2013; Sollund, 2015; Nurse, 2015; Spapens et al, 2018; Ruggiero, 2020; Brisman and South, 2020; Arboleda, 2020). Degrowth strategies would be likely to prevent and/or reduce these specific harmful conducts adopted by powerful individuals and groups.

The crimes of the powerful have been examined from a variety of theoretical perspectives, and as reviews of the literature are widely available elsewhere, it might suffice here to concisely summarize them (Ruggiero, 2015).

Anomie theory would suggest that the settings in which the elite operates are already largely normless, thus encouraging experimental conducts and allowing for arbitrary expansion of practices. Control theory focuses on the characteristics of offenders, including their impulsivity, recklessness and incapacity to delay gratification. A different conceptualization focuses on 'control balance', namely on the degree of control on others powerful offenders detain relative to the degree of control they are subjected to by others. Micro-sociological aspects have been explored, observing the dynamics guiding the behaviour of organizations and their members. As organizations become more complex, responsibility are decentralized, while their human components find themselves inhabiting an increasingly opaque environment in which the goals to pursue and the modalities through which one is expected to pursue them become vague and negotiable. The crimes of the powerful as 'situated action' have been interpreted as the result of contextual cultures that affect decisions to violate the law. Such violations are deemed less the result of sheer greed than the outcome of 'fear of falling' or 'status panic'. The worlds inhabited by powerful offenders, it is contended, are guided by key cultural elements facilitating criminality: unbridled competition, a pervasive sense of arrogance and an ethic of entitlement.

The strategic proposals of the degrowth movement would ideally alter the conditions which, according to the theories sketched above, facilitate offending by powerful actors. Anomie would be tempered by normative priorities protecting environments and their human and non-human inhabitants, while arbitrary experiments will be limited by the collective property of technology and its convivial use. Lack of self-control and inability to delay gratification would be partly hampered by the collective decision-making power as to the quantity and quality of the goods to be produced. An adjustment of control balance would generate a similar effect, while organizations would be affected by the prohibition to reward shareholders and to continue operating in damaging industries. Major harmful organizations, such as corporations, could even face outright dismantlement (Tombs and Whyte, 2015). 'Fear of falling' and 'status panic' will benefit from the therapeutic nature of commoning, as will competition, arrogance and the ethic of entitlement.

Degrowth finds implicit adherence among criminologists who misrecognize the effect of economic development on crime reduction. Such criminologists are inclined to explain transnational crimes of the powerful through the relative affluence of developed countries rather than the relative deprivation of developing ones. This analytical perspective amounts to a rejection of 'the etiology of deficit', that deserves a brief digression.

Criminological theory is hindered by a cumbersome legacy that consists of crime causations revolving around notions of lack, deficiency, inadequacy. These notions tend to associate all antisocial behaviour with a condition of disadvantage, be it economic, cultural or psychological, while the production of harm is supposed to reveal the weakness of the bonds individuals and groups establish with society. The 'paradigm of deficit' fails to interpret the conduct of powerful offenders, who cause harm due to what I would term the hypertrophic growth of opportunities they are offered to pursue profit. The degrowth movement, in turn, sees environmental harm less as the result of poverty, underdevelopment or lack of self-control than its opposite: affluence, development and the control of resources. These causative variables tend to be increasingly significant with the decrease in the collective force of those who are victimized. In this sense, affluence, development and the control of resources follow the same trajectory of institutional violence, which steps up when growing inequality deprives potential victims of the space, infrastructures, social energy and political ability to oppose it. Let us now focus on criminological contributions that reveal varying degrees of resonance with the degrowth paradigm.

Attempts to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene have adopted a security governance lens (Shearing, 2015). The relationship between the social and the natural worlds, it is argued, should be guided by principles of security, a variable that in criminology is connected to the conditions that promote interpersonal peace (Zedner, 2006). **Therefore, environmental security, from a criminological perspective, is confined to the prevention or reduction of victimization processes and is deemed sufficient to provide protection from crimes against humans and the earth. It is also assumed that this type of security can be achieved within contemporary forms of market economies.**

Contributions focused on cataclysms, on the other hand, warn on the incapacity of market economies to avert environmental collapse (Testot, 2020).

The catastrophe that unfolded in Australia in June 2019 led to ‘loss of lives, destroyed eighteen million hectares of land, killed one billion animals and drove more out of extinction’ (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson, 2020: 2). Descriptions of this event as due to inscrutable evil or vicious natural disaster hide the violence of economic growth and its deadly effects on the climate. Australia, it is noted, is among the largest world producers of fossil fuel emissions, and the fires and floods are less the result of mismanagement or incompetence than of economic growth and the obsessive pursuit of profits.

Degrowth, in this analysis, would defuse the corporate violence inherent in ‘the capitalist mode of production’ while introducing ecologically sustainable alternatives and social justice (ibid). Degrowth strategies are described as a range of measures that aim at the reorganization of societies around the decrease of the flows of material, energy and waste: the biophysical throughput. Such strategies are also deemed appropriate for the reduction of the direct violence exerted by corporations against campaigners who oppose their devastating operations.

In sum, degrowth aspires to reduce the ‘compulsive development disorder’ fostered by market economies, and at the same time the ‘compulsive buying disorder’ they induce in sections of populations. This prompts some observations around the potential impact of degrowth philosophies on the prevention of conventional crime.

Degrowth and conventional crime

Growth is proven to intensify economic inequalities and exacerbate social tensions (Piketty, 2014; Dorling, 2019; Macekura, 2020). The degrowth movement offers evidence that, despite the phenomenal growth in recent decade, there are currently ‘40 million poor in the US and 11 million in the UK, 12% and 17% of the population respectively’ (Kallis et al, 2020: 120). Apologists of neoliberalism, inspired by questionable theories of justice, would retort that increase in inequality is acceptable when it benefits the least advantaged individuals or groups in a given context. In brief, when it allows at least one person to escape the area of indigence. This assumption is based on a notion of absolute poverty, whereas criminology is more inclined to revolve around a concept of relative impoverishment as crime causation.

Relative deprivation features in classic as well as contemporary criminological analysis, at times equated to a spark that ignites selfishness, acquisitive desires and moral indifference, all linked with a consumerist culture (Reiner, 2021). Economic growth may make wealthy groups wealthier and bring the low social layer proportionally (or relatively) lower (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2019). It is worth recollecting that analyses of rising crime rates in periods of economic growth led to what was termed the etiological crisis in criminology (Young, 1986). Rapidly rising inequality in the 1980s and early 1990s was regarded as the cause of an ‘explosion’ of crime, confirmed by both police statistics and victim surveys (Reiner, 2007, 2016). More nuanced research proves that property crime is often linked with underemployment and socially precarious conditions (absolute deprivation), while violent crime is strongly connected with inequality (relative deprivation). The latter type of crime is spawned by

resounding calls for acquisitiveness and encouraged by hoarding and relentless consumption (Currie, 2013).

The relationship between inequality and high levels of violent crime is particularly cogent when austerity measures reduce services and welfare support, spreading unfettered materialistic cultures and deregulation of markets (Rosenfeld and Messner, 2013). Cross-national research confirms this link, revealing a consistent and 'robust, positive relationship between homicide and income inequality' (ibid: 72). Moreover, violent crime is also linked to erosion of networks of mutual support, those informal 'commoning' that replace the absent welfare state. These networks are debilitated when mutual care is hampered by intense work commitments and when collective protest is suffocated by legislation. On the contrary, when institutional performance generates expected rewards, motivation to engage in this type of crime is said to weaken.

According to an accredited hypothesis, property crime entails sporadic or weak presence in markets, but constant interaction with law enforcement, leading to the relatively less serious appropriation of things rather than assault on persons. Violent crime, by contrast, occurs when offenders do have access to markets but achieve low returns from them, while operating in proximity to others who gain high returns. In other words, relative deprivation or visible inequality, supplemented by unsuccessful activity in markets, are more likely to be linked to violent crime (Kelly, 2000). Inequality, moreover, has an impact on violent crime when societies are 'neglectful', that is when they tend to ignore social dysfunctions and wait until these turn into violence, thus legitimizing their harsh repressive reactions. Currie (2016), for example, argues that violent crime linked with inequality is more likely to explode in societies characterized by a culture of 'disregard', in which feelings of responsibility and practices of solidarity are discouraged. Inequality, which is expected to generate 'healthy' competition, with the disadvantaged trying to emulate those better off than them, turns in fact into an ethic of personal gain in the public and private spheres, irrespective of the means utilized.

Great social inequality determines high crime rates, irrespective of the general affluence of countries. The homicide rate in the US is over ten times that of Western Europe and has been growing since the 1960s, in a parallel ascending trajectory with economic growth. Wealth is within view but not within reach, causing resentment and hopelessness: great social inequality 'breaks the bonds that link people to others and to the values and rules of the larger society, and makes possible acts of aggression that would otherwise be inhibited' (Currie, 2020: 138). The absence of channels through which collective action may lead to an attenuation of inequality compounds the condition of certain groups, resulting in inward-turning violence. This causation contains a notion of 'ethnic invariance', that is the idea that it applies across ethnic groups and is rooted in structural differences among communities (Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Peterson and Krivo, 2005). Extreme levels of violence among some black Americans is therefore explained through the extreme social disadvantage they suffer.

Relative deprivation as an explanatory criminological concept is said to be more relevant now than ever before, particularly owing to the hyper-consumerism of the current time (Webber, 2021; Hall and Winlow, 2015). Put in a different way, the causes of conventional crime may be proximate or ultimate (Roth, 2009), the former associated with particular times and places, the latter

connected to enduring social conditions. Policies that address the ultimate causes of crime are likely to generate effective and lasting results (Rosenfeld and Messner, 2013). The degrowth movement, which aims at the reduction of inequality, promises this type of policies. It also appears to endorse potential crime prevention in relation to the type of consumptions it advocates.

Consumers are led by the desire to both emulate others and differentiate themselves from them. On the one hand, they feel entitled to what their average peers possess, on the other hand, they aspire to possess extra commodities that mark their superior social status. Such commodities, also known as positional goods, designate relative privilege and social distinction (Veblen, 1994). Positional needs are created by contemporary market societies, which encourage the appropriation of exclusive commodities and incite status-seeking behaviour: purchasing becomes therefore an act of self-identification and self-representation, one that sets individuals apart from some social groups while uniting them to others (Streeck, 2012). Degrowth stands for the progressive decline of conspicuous goods as the core of self-identification, of consumption as the way of finding one's place in the world, or, as Simmel (1971) would suggest, the decline of 'sociation through consumption'.

Conclusion

The solution for every ill, economic growth had been given a prime role in the prevention of conventional crime and the decline of white-collar offending. More specifically, the opportunities created by growth are commonly identified with job creation, therefore with legitimate occupations that stave off involvement in illegitimate activity. In the area of white-collar offending, economic development and growth are said to be inversely related to political and administrative corruption, which inevitably is perceived as connatural to developing or underdeveloped countries. Even within the Marxist tradition, against the somber warnings of Marx himself, material growth and enhanced productive activity are at times invoked as a panacea for collective wellbeing.

The degrowth movement expresses a sustained critique of economic concepts, regarded by Latouche (2005) as founding myths that reflect the idea of natural order, whereby conflicting social interests coexist as if they were harmonic cosmic forces. In this way, theological reasoning is transferred into the economic realm, so that liturgical chants turn into ecclesiastical-secular praise to markets (Dean, 2019). The degrowth movement unpacks the narratives of dominant economic thought, which naturalizes or obfuscates harm.

The movement, on the other hand, appreciates that current economic systems can create opportunities for substantial investments in green technologies and the creation of new jobs, while acknowledging that in some national contexts the green economy is already larger than the traditional manufacturing sector (kMatrix Data Services, 2021). However, degrowth does not adopt a patronizing stance whereby 'people' have to be taught what their real needs are. The movement regards social change as part of cultural, political and economic processes that achieve hegemonic strength through institutional innovation. Like all contentious political actors, it promotes and 'advocates changes in institutions, policies, values, understandings and everyday modes of living' (Kallis et al, 2018: 309).

This paper has set off with a brief outline of the views of Marx and Weber around development and the environment, with a view to offering degrowth a robust theoretical underpinning. It has then attempted to link degrowth strategies with crime prevention, focusing on the crimes of the powerful and the powerless. In relation to the former, it has been suggested that constraint on economic development will also reduce the criminal opportunities that accompany the hypertrophic expansion of ways to pursue profit. In relation to the latter, the fight against inequality has been presented as one of the key preventative factors. Overall, the reduction of all types of crime would divert towards the collective wellbeing the enormous resources that sustain the criminal justice and the penal systems.

The degrowth movement relies on differing degrees of criticism addressed at the current, prevailing socio-political system. For some, ecological issues override all other problems afflicting humanity. For others, ecological diagnosis should be connected to a variety of other concerns, for example:

‘livelihood insecurity and denial of labour rights; public disinvestment from social reproduction and chronic undervaluation of carework; ethno-racial-imperial oppression and gender and sex discrimination; dispossession, expulsion and exclusion of migrants; militarization, political authoritarianism and police brutality’ (Fraser, 2021: 96).

If it is plausible to see capitalism as the major driver of all these harms, it will not help to await a post-capitalist era that will stop them (Jackson, 2021). Faith in what will come in the future may just encourage the candid acceptance of the status quo, acting as religious consolation that enjoins to endure the present in the name of future reward or salvation. The wisdom of the degrowth movement is found in the idea that current conditions require urgent measures, whether or not the rising sun of future happiness will ever materialize: there may be nobody left to welcome the radiant dawn of post-capitalism.

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