

Conference on Post-Growth at the European Parliament, September 2018 – Challenges and Prospects

Questionning the dogma of growth, which has become incompatible with the human and ecological wellbeing

The historic conference held in the European Parliament in Brussels on ‘post-growth’ revealed the clash around the crucial question: is it possible to decouple CO₂ emissions from economic growth rates and to continue indefinitely the march towards a ‘Green Growth’?

A historic conference was held on 18 and 19 September at the European Parliament in Brussels, on “post-growth”, bringing together scientists, politicians and decision-makers. The event was organized by members of Parliament from five different political parties, together with trade unions and NGOs, and aimed to explore the possibility of a “post-growth economy” in Europe. The conference was preceded by a seminar on ‘degrowth’ organized by the Université Libre de Bruxelles, which brought together scientists from all over Europe involved in research around degrowth. We have followed these four days of debate representing Polis association.

What has impressed us is the journey of this notion, marginal so far, which has succeeded in penetrating the hard core of institutional and decision-making circles, until becoming an object to be debated at the level of the European Parliament. The opening of the conference by Mrs Vestager, European

Commissioner for Competition, is significant of the importance that European institutions are beginning to give to this notion.

At the same time, the debate clearly showed that the concept of degrowth is no longer a concept marking an ideological stance, but an operational concept. In this regard, several researchers have presented research carried out all over Europe and up to the United States (within the MIT), with concrete proposals on the implementation of degrowth initiatives at the economic level.

To give some examples, the presentations included studies on governance and post-growth policy making, case studies on Transition Movements (in Sweden, the Netherlands and elsewhere), developments in the area of municipal sufficiency policies, initiatives on circular economy and zero waste policies, initiatives in urban and transport planning, research for alternatives to GDP and for Corporate and Social Responsibility instruments and reporting standards, research on ecological footprint leading to proposals for a Sustainable Consumption, as well as proposals for cooperation, collective action in view of the establishment of an open horizontal organisation of the degrowth movement.

On the occasion of the conference an appeal to the European institutions was launched, signed by 200 university scientists, and published in the media of 16 European countries [in English, in 'the Guardian']: <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/16/the-eu-needs-a-stability-and-wellbeing-pact-not-more-growth>>]: "For the past seven decades, GDP growth has stood as the primary economic objective of European nations. But as our economies have grown, so has our negative impact on the environment. We are now exceeding the safe operating space for humanity on this planet, and there is no sign that economic activity is being decoupled from resource use or pollution at anything like the scale required. Today, solving social problems within

European nations does not require more growth. It requires a fairer distribution of the income and wealth that we already have.”

We felt during and after the conference that two languages were being spoken and that two opposing views were competing. The representatives of the European Commission were talking about Green Growth and were convinced that a decoupling of CO₂ emissions and economic growth rates is possible. On the other hand, the Degrowth movement (basically, represented by people and institutions gathered around the call of the Université Libre de Bruxelles) was arguing for the opposite. It quickly became clear that concrete measures and details of a post-growth society cannot be clarified if the fundamental question of decoupling is not resolved.

To find out more, consult the work of the group ‘Research and Degrowth’, an academic association dedicated to research, training, and awareness on degrowth: <<https://degrowth.org/>>

Yolanda Ziaka