

The Paradox of Sustainable Degrowth and a Convivial Alternative

OSCAR KRÜGER

School of Anthropology and Conservation

University of Kent

Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NR

Email: jk519@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

Insofar as development implies economic growth, the term ‘sustainable development’ appears to some as a contradiction in terms. However, such conclusions still lack a thorough examination of the conceptual structure of the two terms between which there is a purported contradiction. In order to address this issue, the present paper scrutinizes some of the assumptions which underwrite the ideologies of sustainability and of development. It is argued that there are key assumptions which both ideas have in common, and that sustainable development is thus perfectly coherent on a conceptual level. It is alternatives which retain either term (such as ‘sustainable degrowth’) that are embroiled in paradox. The paper then examines two concepts for criticizing the ideology of economic growth in other terms: *dépense* and *conviviality*. It is argued that the latter is preferable to the former for the purpose of developing post-sustainable critiques of growth.

Keywords

Degrowth; sustainability; *dépense*; *conviviality*.

1. INTRODUCTION

For as long as sustainable development has been a concept in common parlance, it has faced critical scrutiny (e.g. Krueger and Gibbs, 2007). Where some critics merely hold the precepts of sustainable development to be inadequately implemented, others hold the very concept to be a contradiction in terms. If *development* implies economic growth of a kind that will lay claim to evermore resources, does it not advocate a course of action in direct opposition to the one advocated by *sustainability* – namely the preservation of life within bounds of planetary finitude? Such considerations have found a fertile ground within the burgeoning debate on degrowth (see Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017). In this paper, I am not concerned with this contradiction between sustainability and growth. Instead, I argue that there is a contradiction between sustainability and *de-growth*, insofar as calls for the latter are made in name of the former.

When sustainability becomes the central reference for critiques of processes of growth – when it is argued that we need to de-grow *in order to be sustainable* – then the transition to an economy beyond growth comes to appear an unpalatable sacrifice, which is nevertheless necessary if life is to go on. While the hegemony of growth is maintained by many means (e.g. Koch, 2018), one important part is surely played by framing alternatives to it as if they were obligations rather than intrinsically preferable possibilities. And while the ideology of growth can likewise be criticised by many means, a scrutiny of concepts will surely play a part in undoing existing closures of the imagination.

The paper is divided into two sections. In the first I argue that there is a profound conceptual relation between the idea of sustainability and the idea of growth, which in the latter case is particularly strongly manifest in the idea of consumption. This relation is what makes calls for ‘sustainable degrowth’ paradoxical. In the second section, I discuss two alternative concepts: *dépense* and conviviality. While *dépense* overcomes the dead-end of sustainability, I argue that it nevertheless remains shaped by the imaginary of consumption. Conviviality, as developed by Ivan

Illich, offers a more cogent mode of growth-critique.

The paper is thus concerned with how concepts describe situations. As Burke and Shear insist, ‘the discursive and symbolic framing of a situation produces material, socio-ecological relations. In this sense, to describe the world in a compelling way is to change it, and to change the world requires compelling new descriptions’ (2014: 130). In this vein, the same questions apply to each of the concepts discussed below. Taking sustainability as an example, this approach means that I do not attend to sustainable actions as such, but to: (a) *What* it means to describe an action as sustainable; (b) *Who* employs the concept sustainability when describing actions; (c) *How* it comes that the concept has come to appear an appropriate term for making descriptions.

With this approach, it is important to keep in mind that the concepts discussed might not correspond to anything a person engaged in an action would use to describe *his own* actions. An act may be sustainable without anything like the concept sustainability having ever occurred to the person who acts. This does not mean that the concept sustainability would be inadmissible for describing the situation. It does, however, compel us to attend more carefully to hidden assumptions on the side of the one who describes the situation so, as well as to what *really* motivates the sustainable action, if it is not a desire to be sustainable.

This paper does not reject existing critiques developed within the degrowth-debate. Instead, where Latouche (2003) asserts that ‘[t]he problem with sustainable development is not so much the word ‘sustainable’ [...] as that of ‘development’’, the paper calls for a scrutiny of sustainability equal to that awarded the concept of development. Already the Degrowth Declaration of Paris 2008 is brimming with ideas beyond the paradigm of sustainability, and it is in this respect that the concept of conviviality may lead further along the path already indicated by *dépense*.

2. GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

This section demonstrates that there is a conceptual relation between appeals to growth and appeals to sustainability. This relation exists on the level of the historical circumstances which have made each concept an appropriate term by which to describe and to judge the world.

Sustainability and Life

What does it really mean to call something sustainable? As institutions scramble to attach themselves to sustainability, its meaning remains elusive. Even if Caradonna (2014: 5) rightly notes that there are a number of common things which adherents of sustainability envision – ranging from public transport to social justice – the question remains what the concept *itself* might actually mean. To bring some light onto this issue, it is necessary to attend to the history of sustainability.

Yet also this history has been written from diverging perspectives. Caradonna (2015), however, argues that the historiography of sustainability demonstrates that there are two main genres: One which employs the contemporary criteria of sustainability so to scrutinize historical societies. This way of employing the word sustainability enables statements (such as found in Caradonna's own work) which hold that 'aboriginal tribes from the Eastern seaboard of North America to the Amazonian rainforest used forests sustainably to meet their diverse needs' (Caradonna, 2014: 40). Such claims may well be true. However, they also tend to efface any examination of the logic which actually guides the behaviour in question. As the anthropologist Terence Turner notes, about his interlocutors from one such people of the Amazon, these 'are no more concerned with the ideological rhetoric of Western ecoliberals than were their 16th century ancestors with the mystery of the Holy Trinity' (Turner, 1995: 121).

The second genre is one concerned with the *idea* of sustainability itself. Here, I would go beyond Caradonna by dividing this genre into two sub-genre's: First, one which is generally positive to sustainability. Author's in this genre tend to insist on the *difference* of the concept from those ideas

they see as governing our contemporary (unsustainable) society, as well as its *similarity* to precedents in ancient forms of thinking (e.g. Du Pisani, 2006; Mebratu 1998). Grober (2012), for instance, despite emphasising the significance of early modern forestry, ultimately identifies sustainability with an impulse towards self-preservation, which he holds to be ‘our primordial world cultural heritage’ (Grober, 2012: 15). The second sub-genre tends to be more critical towards sustainability. Here the emphasis is on the *similarity* of sustainability to ideas characteristic of contemporary (capitalist, imperialist) society, and its magnitude of *difference* from pre-modern ideas (e.g. Mitcham 1995; Dale 2018).

Works from both genres are in agreement on two things. First, that Enlightenment modernity was a historical period which furnished the structure that sustainability retains to this day and, second, that a concern with the preservation of life lies at the heart of the idea. The latter trait – that where sustainability is concerned with - ‘the ability of humans to continue to live within environmental constraints’ (Robinson 2004: 370) – is so ubiquitous that it easily escapes notice. Yet, as the author of a quantitative study on words used to define sustainability suggest, *life* - the fourth most common word - ‘subsumes all of its sibling terms; sustainability is life, and vice versa’ (White, 2013: 215).

Where the underlying approach of the respective genres then part ways is in how they understand the origins of this modern preoccupation with life. In the first sub-genre, Grober largely sees this modern preoccupation as a development where an ‘intuitive precautionary thinking crystallised [...] into a specific concept’ (Grober, 2012: 16). Writing about the same preoccupation from a perspective belonging to the second sub-genre, by contrast, Michael Redclift holds it to emerge ‘from problems generated by Modernism itself’ (Redclift, 1993: 4. emphasis removed). In short, where both genres understands the idea of sustainability in similar terms, the second one regards the idea as emerging from conditions *specific* to the time and space of modernity. Following this precedent set by Redclift already in the second volume of *Environmental Values*, the second

approach is the one I commit to here.¹

A full account of what engendered the early modern preoccupation with the protection of life would be long and complex. However, given my concern in this paper with concepts used to describe the world, an interesting vantage point is offered by a tradition that understands modernity largely in terms of a transformation regarding the role played by any *ethical* concepts whatsoever. Preceded by a context where ethical injunctions ‘presuppose a reference to some shared impersonal standard of virtue’ (MacIntyre, 2007: ix), this modernity is characterized by refusing (for the purposes of ordering public life) any reference to such standards (Žižek, 2008a; Michéa, 2009; Sandel, 2009). What then emerged was a need for a substitute to such standards, where soon an objectively knowable ‘nature’ entered so to ‘[take] over the old religion’s fundamental function of having an unquestionable authority that can impose limits’ (Žižek, 2008b: 53-54).

Today, such a concern, which puts primacy on an objectively knowable bio-physical domain, is maintained also in discourse on ‘sustainability’ more narrowly (Blüdhorn, 2016: 263). Insofar as *this* is the sphere invoked for injunctions which govern human life, this governance will pertain to the management of biological survival – a survival that can serve as an imperative *without* the need for anybody to invoke standards for what surviving is actually good for. In this case, insofar as sustainability has today emerged as ‘a new name for the good’ (Mitcham 1995: 322), we now live in a context where ‘[n]ot the good life, but life itself – its comfort, convenience and prolongation – has become our overriding goal’ (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012: 94).

With the understanding of sustainability which this tradition can offer, we would recognize it as

1 In line with what Charles Taylor (1999) calls a ‘cultural’ understanding of modernity, the latter is not understood as springing from a generic process such as (say) the growth of universal reason. Modernity, as used here, is as specifically Western as sustainability is specifically modern. In addition to the modern ‘Cartesian’ philosophy of nature, familiar to much environmentally oriented scholarship, the present paper emphasizes the specificity of the modern *social* imaginary (from authors such as Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau). This social imaginary forefronts the individual, the antagonistic interplay between the contesting wills of such individuals, and a concern with bare survival (compare Esposito (2010) and Milbank and Pabst (2016) for similar characterizations of modern thinking, written from very different political philosophies).

postulating a specific imperative: Life is the supreme value, and the conditions for its continuation must be maintained. Insofar as this imperative is directed against consumer habits, it translates into calls for letting considerations of survival trump desire for consumption. But given this framing, what *is* that consumption we are called to sacrifice on the altar of life-as-such?

Consumption and Desire

Whether as moral exhortations directed at individuals or as injunctions towards systemic change, a prime target for the imperative of sustainability has long been *consumption*. Hence, *Our Common Future* insists on the necessity of implementing ‘consumption standards that are within the bounds of the ecological possible’ (WCED, 1987: 44). Simultaneously, a belief that people in general are unwilling to voluntarily reduce their consumption lead many to regard such change as unrealistic (see Maniates and Meyer, 2010). But what does it really *mean* to call something an act of consumption?

My approach here remains the same as that taken to sustainability. Instead of asking what generates the behaviour, I follow the anthropologist David Graeber in asking

[W]hy it is that we assume [consumption] exist. Why is it that when we see someone buying refrigerator magnets and someone else putting on eyeliner or cooking dinner [...] we assume that [...] it can be described as “consumption”? (Graeber 2011: 49)

Beginning from the etymology of the word itself, we find that it relates to activities of using up and destroying (Graeber, 2011: 492), and in its first appearance in the English language, it refers to what a fire does to materials when burning them (Wilks, 2004). Within the imaginative coordinates furnished by modern political economy, this is something which has acquired an immense significance. Within these coordinates, human activity is interpreted in terms of two categories: The *pain* of productive labour, which is undertaken for the sake of the *pleasure* of consumption. From

early modernity onwards, as activities were increasingly understood in terms of this binary, ‘desire itself began to be imagined as the desire to consume’ (Graeber, 2011: 493).

To describe desire in such terms is a habit specific to Western modernity. Graeber suggests that the reason that such descriptions gained a hold in this context, is due to the emergence of the market as the dominant organizing sphere for social life. Soon, people began to understand also themselves and their mutual relations in terms of property. Supposedly, ancient law held that your ultimate entitlement of proprietorship lies in the right to *destroy* that which belongs to you (Graeber, 2011: 499). Thus, once desire had become desire for property, the idea that its consummation is found in acts of destruction made perfect sense.

Graeber’s narrative is certainly appealing. However, it is itself based in a certain idea of what the market is like. That is, the narrative takes for granted a specific description of the market, which understands it as a sphere for the antagonistic interplay of self-interest. This sort of description is widespread – developed by Smith, it was taken over by Marx and Polanyi, only with Smith’s celebration turned into lamentation (Bruni and Zamagni, 2007: 16). However this manner of understanding the market has not always been omnipresent even within the field of economics itself. By scholars such as Antonio Genovesi - the first holder of Europe’s first chair in economics – humans were understood as oriented primarily by a logic of mutual assistance (Bruni and Sugden, 2008: 46). This also in exchange, wherefore the science of economics was thought of as concerned primarily with the conditions of shared happiness (Screpanti and Zamagni, 2005) - happiness ‘shared’ in a sense which was thought to be intrinsic to its very nature.

The point is that there are different kinds of markets, and different ways of imagining what markets are really like. Graeber’s suggestion (regarding the origins of the idea of consumption) is compelling, but makes sense only on basis of Smith’s description of the market (as a sphere for the

interaction self-interest). In order to understand why people began to understand the nature of desire in terms of consumption, we must press further by asking what first paved the way for this modern manner of *describing* the market. The answer is that a public sphere for the rational pursuit of economic self-interest did *not* first appear in the form of an objective description of society as it is. Instead, it appeared as a *possibility* which was regarded by some as eminently desirable to institutionalize. But why would anybody find it desirable to do so?

In an argument developed by Albert O. Hirschman (1977) in an often overlooked work, the answer leads back to the same historical context that created the idea of sustainability. That is, where attempts to order society by means of precepts that refer to substantive conceptions of the good were no longer admissible. If this led some to develop forms of appeal that would rather refer to an objective ‘nature’, to others another solution arose: If ethical precepts are unable to inhibit the destructive vices of humans, might it not instead be possible to play these vices out against each other? From Aristotle to Aquinas, one such vice had been the excessive pursuit of money. By the visionaries of early modernity, this vice was now harnessed for exactly this purpose. The appeals money-making exercised were manifold, but particularly significant was exactly that which much discourse on sustainability today challenges for its imminent confrontation with planetary limits: Its *insatiability*. One can never have *enough* money, and thus profit-oriented behaviour remains constant and predictable beyond any horizon.

This vision of a sphere where human interaction would be guided by economic self-interest facilitated the development of the distinctive characteristic of Smith’s model, namely a strict separation between an impersonal market and a sphere for genuinely personal relations (Bruni and Sugden, 2008). *This* is the kind of market which, along the lines suggested by Graeber, then lent itself to the imaginary of consumption. The conclusion follows that the idea of consumption not only emerged around the same time as that of sustainability - it also sprang forth from the very same

decision to delimit the social role played by appeals to substantive notions of the good.

The Paradox of Sustainable Degrowth

Above, I have demonstrated some ways in which appeals to growth and appeals to sustainability share a common origin and form. In this section, I suggest that the relation between the two terms discussed so far – sustainability and consumption – is such as to render calls for sustainable degrowth *paradoxical*.

Paradox, a term I adopt from David Bohm (2003), is a manner of describing a state of affairs. This is distinct from how the same state of affairs would be described if it was taken as a problem. To a problem, a straightforward solution can be developed. In a paradox, by contrast, we would encounter a co-constitutive relation between a problem, a solution to this problem, and the goal for which sake a person wants to resolve the very problem to begin with. The key notion here is that a problematic state of affairs only appears as such in light of a definite goal. Thus, it is possible that whatever has created the goal also generates the behaviour which is problematic in light of it.

How then about the issue of consumption? To recognize economic growth as a *problem* for sustainability might lead to calls for voluntary simplicity and degrowth as a solution. One might then (for instance) seek to solve this problem by demonstrating to people that their patterns of consumption (which this growth enables) are unsustainable. Conceiving of the same issue as a *paradox*, by contrast, would mean to understand the problematic behaviour (consumption) as co-constituted with the goal (sustainability) for which it is a problem. That is, the *aim* of sustainability (survival) is here regarded as something which has *become* an aim for the same reasons that encourage people to engage in acts of consumption.

To see how this may be the case, we can turn to one of the key questions addressed by degrowth scholars: Is (unlimited) economic growth sustainable or not? Degrowth scholars tend to answer: No,

growth is not sustainable. This is an important conclusion, which enables a radical challenge to growth and consumerism. However, in this case, the radical challenge gains its force by appealing to a wholly conventional concept, which embodies wholly conventional concerns. No amount of demonstrations that sustainability requires degrowth will ever amount to a challenge towards the framing wherein *sustainability* is the goal that really matters. Now, the argument in the preceding two sections is that sustainability gains this force from certain assumptions, which are the same as those which underwrite the ideology of consumption. In harnessing the force of sustainability in order to challenge growth and consumption, then, such degrowth-arguments rely on the same sentiments which would have us believe that what we really want is to consume to begin with.

This is the kind of conceptual constellation that Bohm describes with the word paradox. But then, what difference would it make to think of our present predicament in terms of paradox rather than problem? According to Bohm, to think of an issue in terms of paradox would allow us to step back from a search for ‘solutions’, in order to rather *dissolve* the issue at its root (Bohm, 2003: 63). Such dissolution might then make space for alternative modes of appeal.

Now, this paradox is found only where limitless economic growth is understood as intrinsically unsustainable. It does not appear in cases where economic growth is seen as the harbinger of a transition to sustainability. Furthermore, it is primarily between a preoccupation with survival and a notion of desire as desire-for-consumption that the paradox exists. While I argue above that such concerns are central to the ideas of sustainability and of economic growth, the paradox does not emerge from the full range of values associated with the term sustainability. Precisely for this reason, however, the question is whether degrowth-oriented scholars might not be able to better articulate many of these values by means of other concepts. In the following section, I discuss two promising alternatives.

3. DÉPENSE OR CONVIVIALITY

The critique that degrowth levels against the imperative of economic growth is by no means reliant on the concept of sustainability. *Dépense*, in particular, has recently emerged as a radical challenge to older, sustainability-oriented, critiques. And while it has not yet been advanced as such, the concept conviviality (as developed by Ivan Illich) implies an equally radical break with the logic of sustainability.

Below, I discuss these two concepts, and argue that conviviality ultimately offers a more thorough break with the assumptions which underpin the imaginary of growth.

Dépense

Elaborating on how life and economy are imagined in rural parts of Panama and Colombia, anthropologist Stephen Gudeman notes the key role played by a notion of strength: ‘Things made, whether tools, furniture, clothing, or houses, emerge only through the use of strength, whose expenditure they embody’ (Gudeman, 2012: 61). The flow of strength is carefully attended to, in order to secure the continued existence of the household (the basic economic unit). However, everyday life is occasionally interrupted by celebratory events - baptism, marriage – where strength is expended without any subsequent reinforcement of this base: ‘Whether large or small, such events represent an expenditure of strength that brings no material return’ (Gudeman, 2012: 71).

This rural logic thus has two sides, which appears to promote two kinds of behaviour: Acts which ensure the continued existence of the household, and acts that puts the conditions for this existence to waste. If these societies are to be judged *sustainable*, then, it is imperative that the excesses of the second side remain confined within boundaries set by the first. By contrast, adherents of *dépense* – a concept adopted from Georges Bataille – argue the exact opposite (see D’Alisa et al., 2015; Romano, 2015; Romano, 2016). Their argument starts from the notion that the problem to be

overcome is not that of an ever-threatening scarcity of resources, but rather an ever-expanding process of limitless growth. If this the problem (the argument continues) then the solution is to create conditions where the second side of the logic (the one which among Gudeman's interlocutors underwrite acts where strength is expended without return) can contain the 'sustainable' side.

This notion rests on a very particular way of understanding the phenomenon of growth. In a critique of conventional degrowth-appeals, published by Onofrio Romano (2016) in a previous issue of this journal, the argument goes like this: Growth is *not* driven by any specific values, and it is thus futile to challenge it by means of promoting a different set of such values. The problem is, rather, one which pertains to what Romano calls the 'form' which decides when and how values – any values – gain their efficacy. These forms are paradigms, which frame both how society is conceived and the kind of interventions pursued within it. Romano then argues that the history of modernity can be told of as a hegemonic alteration of two kinds of paradigms: One which is formally horizontal, the other formally vertical. Horizontal paradigms conceive of society as something composed by individual units, and tend to pursue the release of these from the shackles of collective constraint. Vertical paradigms conceive of society as being a 'whole' on a level more fundamental than that of its components, and tend to advocate interventions on the level of the overarching will which absorbs its component members into itself.

The suggestion is, then, that we presently live under the hegemony of a horizontal regime, and that it is this horizontalism *itself* that spurs growth ever onwards (Romano, 2012: 586). This is because its determination to 'liberate' the individual also severs the bond to any social whole, thus engendering a feeling of precarious isolation. The person will react to this precariousness by seeking to acquire the resources which would ensure his survival – and this is the phenomenon of growth. What conventional forms of degrowth-thinking fail to do, according to Romano, is to challenge this basic framework of horizontalism.

This is where ‘[e]xpenditures in pyramids, churches, festivals, celebratory fires or potlatch’ (Kallis et al., 2015: 10) enter as a solution. *Not* as the particular values they embody, but as things created because they were “what ‘the good life’ was for these civilizations, not because they contributed to production or growth” (Kallis et al., 2015: 10). They are activities of the second kind described by Gudeman – those which *expend* the surplus strength which would otherwise be invested in the pursuit of growth and survival. To overcome this self-reinforcing logic of re-investment is to overcome the problem of growth. This, in turn, relies on instead investing collective surplus in shared projects, which is it would only be possible to do within a vertical top-down regime of collective sovereignty.

In terms of a contrast to the idea of sustainability, the difference here could not be any more stark. Sustainability aspires to make the preservation of existence into an overarching social aim (e.g. Grober, 2012); the adherents of *dépense* maintain that ‘[t]he aim of being is not *existence* but *dépense*’ (Romano, n.d.: 10). That is, such aims are generated in events which expend those resources which otherwise merely perpetuate existence. Here, there is no paradox of the kind discussed in the first part of this paper. However, this does not mean that *dépense* is convincing in its own right. While the following reflections are not meant to decisively conclude the debate on the topic, I believe that the utility of the concept is thrown into doubt by interrogating it further along the lines applied to sustainability and consumption above.

So far, I have discussed the meaning of *dépense* and the understanding of the world that makes it appear a useful concept. From within the same approach taken to sustainability above, the questions which remain are those of *who* understands the world in such terms, and how they have come to understand it so. *Dépense* is not a universal concept, and neither is it one which only modern liberals, beholden to a horizontalist paradigm of thought, would find dubious. How about the people who actually engaged in the activities used to exemplify the concept? Whether or not the logic of

dépense corresponds to the logic whereby these people themselves conduct their activities would need to be interrogated on a case-to-case basis. But a short engagement with two concepts central to Bataille – *potlatch* and *sacrifice* – suffices to demonstrate the distance we are dealing with here.

The *potlatch* were events where the Kwakiutl, of the Pacific Northwest, put their accumulated wealth to the fire in great displays of expenditure. However, the ethnographic examples which inspired people like Bataille were but a few anomalous potlatches staged around 1900, when Kwakiutl society was ravaged by capitalism and disease (Masco, 1995). That is, they were anything but examples of any enduring social logic oriented towards the destruction of surplus as such. The term sacrifice, in turn, refers to a wide range of activities. But if we turn to just one recent study on animal sacrifice in the Himalayas (Govindrajan, 2015), we find a narrative about people whose aim is to strengthen the affective web of intimate relations that binds them to each other and to their animals. The power of the sacrifices spring from bonds of social intimacy, and there is no indication that the language of *dépense* help us to better understand the logic and the experience which lead Govindrajan's interlocutors to conduct such sacrifice.

The point is that the vocabulary of *dépense* leads us to conceive of the aforementioned activities in terms which likely differ significantly from those by which these people themselves understand their own activities. Admittedly, no amount of such demonstrations would finally debunk the idea of *dépense*. What such demonstrations *do* tell us, however, is that *dépense* should be treated as an idea specific to a time and place, appearing there for specific reasons. Now, the distinctive traits of *dépense* (at least in the admittedly idiosyncratic interpretation whereby Romano (n.d.: 9) funnels the concept into the context of degrowth) are two: The notion that 'the ultimate purpose of the living being is destruction' (Romano, n.d: 10), and that an orientation towards such purpose needs to be enabled by a vertical paradigm. What sort of cultural imaginary might have facilitated such ideas?

First, there is the issue of how Romano rejects horizontalist approaches for the reason that these ignore how ‘evil has the propensity to run much faster than the good’ (Romano, 2012: 587). This, then, is taken to imply the need for a vertical paradigm, on the grounds that any ‘third way’ is impossible’ (Romano, 2016: 587). The assumptions which underpin these commitments can be readily identified: The initial rejection of horizontalism reproduces the pessimistic anthropology which, as argued above, also inaugurated the modern refusal of ethical appeals. If Romano may then be right in that there is an oscillation between the horizontal and the vertical, such a movement is likewise one between the specifically *modern* coordinates of ‘the isolated individual and some collective unity either objectively compounded or artificially supposed’ (Pabst, 2017: 34). Likewise in terms of theoretical paradigms: Among many efforts to develop an allegedly impossible ‘third way’, it is sufficient to adopt the perspective offered by Tim Ingold (2015) in order to gain a vantage point from where the conflicting (vertical-horizontal) paradigms of Romano would appear not only structurally homologous with each other, but also mutually reliant on the same specifically *modern* metaphysical assumptions.

Then, there is the notion that the aim of being is destruction. In light of the characterization of consumption that is found in the first part of this paper, such notions (which conflates aim and destruction) appears a direct reflection of this ideology. Bataille himself *explicitly* invoked the phenomenon of consumption developing his concept of *dépense* (Bataille, 1985: 118; see also Landa, 2014). If Romano (n.d.:13) believes that a ‘consumerist communism’ may take the place of the economy of growth, the argument presented above would have us regard such notions as wholly internal to growth-society. Here, *dépense* ultimately appears bound to the coordinates of the paradigm it seeks to undo. That is, it would have us elevate useless consumption over useful production – but, in so doing, it retains the binary coordinates which underwrites modern political economy and growth society itself.

In this section, my interrogation of recent efforts aimed at re-articulating degrowth around the concept of *dépense* echoes judgements previously levelled against Bataille himself. The philosopher Michael Marder, for instance, argues that Bataille's theoretical project 'remains [...] logically and ontologically dependent on the framework it exceeds' (Marder, 2017: 77). Similarly, David Graeber (2011: 492) suggests that events such as the potlatch fascinated thinkers like Bataille *not* because these events manifested any transcendent truth, but because they served as a mirror for these thinkers to project the destructive logic of their own consumerist societies. The conclusion follows that other concepts may be required if we are to make a more thorough break with such paradigms. Below, I examine the concept of *conviviality* in this regard.

Conviviality

From his early critiques of education and medicine, up to his late scrutiny of 'needs' and systems-thinking, the works of Ivan Illich can be read as a great challenge to 'sustainable development'. Eventually, this critique came to include also the central preoccupation of sustainability more narrowly, namely life.

'To Hell with Life!' Illich exclaimed (Duden, 2003), just around the time when sustainability was gaining a steady hold on public discourse. At the time, there were few to heed Illich's warnings. Once an intellectual superstar, he had largely withdrawn from the public eye. While his influence remained important in subaltern intellectual currents such as degrowth, also in this context he has tended to be understood as one of the 'environmental thinkers of the 1970s' (Martínez-Alier, 2012: 62). It was during this early period that Illich developed his most famous concept, namely *conviviality*. However, most who draw on this concept then also ignore the developments which his thinking underwent up to his death in 2002. Below, I discuss what *conviviality means* when read in light of Illich's later work, and demonstrate how it presents a particularly interesting alternative to

both *dépense* and sustainability.

Marco Deriu (2015) warns his readers *not* to understand the term in its everyday sense of ‘joy or light-heartedness; it refers to a society in which modern tools are used by everyone in an integrated and shared manner, without reliance on a body of specialists who control said instruments’ (Deriu, 2015: 79). ‘Tools’, here, is used in a wide enough sense to include also things such as schools and hospitals. The key values of a convivial society, then, are ‘survival, justice and self-defined work’ (Illich, 1973: 26). These values may first appear to summarize the basic ideals today included within sustainable development. But what do these words actually *mean* here? If read in light of Illich’s larger trajectory of thinking, their meaning cannot be taken in their everyday sense any more than can that of conviviality. Below, I discuss each term in turn.

Justice: Ivan Illich at one point came to assert that ‘[q]uestions of social justice may actually be a distraction, hindering thought about real solutions’ (Illich, n.d.). Making this point explicit late in life, already Illich’s early work contained warnings of how justice may be ‘debased to mean the equal distribution of institutional wares’ (Illich, 1973: 25). As long as debates on justice remain concerned with access to schooling, healthcare or commodities, the value of these things *as such* remain unchallenged. By contrast, ‘a ‘just’ degrowth society, in which claims for the good life are constitutive for justice, is only possible if patterns of recognition and established values are renegotiated’ (Muraca, 2012: 543). To be concerned with justice in a convivial sense means to be concerned with the freedom to negotiate the scales which decide what justice really means.

Self-defined work: A famous passage by Illich holds that ‘[p]eople do not need only to obtain things; they need above all the freedom to make things among which they can live, to give shape to them according to their own taste’ (Illich and Verne, 1976: 25). This is the reference point for most uses of conviviality (e.g. Muraca and Neuber, 2017). Here, conviviality works as a shorthand for

challenging scales and tools in the name of autonomy. But also here there is a danger, insofar as conviviality may be interpreted as referring to the modern autonomy of the self-determining individual. Instead, Illich's thinking was underwritten by a *relational* understanding of the person (Ravenscroft, 2016). This relationally constituted person is wholly different from the modern individual, and Illich maintained that 'I cannot come to be fully human unless I have received myself as a gift and accepted myself as a gift of somebody' (Illich et al., 1997). This fully human person is not an individual faced with a range of choices, and the most crucial issue for convivial autonomy pertains to the possibility of going beyond any in-group logic for establishing relations of friendship between persons (see Illich and Cayley, 2005). The oft-quoted passage above actually continues '... and to put them to use in caring for and about each other' (Illich and Verne, 1976: 25). To critique tools in the name of convivial autonomy implies consideration of the conditions which allow relations of inter-personal *friendship* to arise.

Survival: The dangers posed by an ideology focused on life had not emerged as a problem for Illich at the point in time at which he wrote the phrase discussed here. However, later in life, he repudiated ideologies of life, and connected this rejection to that dread he harboured towards 'systems thinking' (Illich and Cayley, 2005). With life reduced to something which fits into a frame of measurable variables, what Illich feared was how "'Life' has become a way of speaking about what were once respectfully called persons" (Illich, in Cayley, 1992: 257). Friendship is a form of relation that requires there to be a person there to befriend. This may well require that person to have *survived* so as to be alive. Yet, in the perspective of Illich, when this person is re-constituted as 'a life', the person we encounter in the flesh – whose physical presence strikes us in the belly (Illich and Cayley, 2005: 227) – is obviated.

In order to make sense of this re-reading of the words which define conviviality, the best way is to put Illich's thinking in the context of *who* the assumptions which underwrite it might have made

sense to. Primarily, the answer is found in viewing Illich's critique as something which invokes perspectives far removed from the modern imaginary which underwrites both sustainability and consumption. That is, in viewing it as having developed in a dialogue with certain medieval thinkers, such as his 12th century 'teacher' Hugh of St Victor (Illich, 1998: 233). In this tradition, there was a strong tendency to understand humans as oriented towards happiness – happiness, however, was understood as intrinsically connected to friendship (McEvoy, 2003). Within this social imaginary, which Illich partially recovered, '[t]he social body [was] ordered toward a common goal: to live in charity' (Ravenscroft, 2016: 150).

As Illich himself reflected late in life, 'the love of friendship, *philia*, as practicable under the social and symbolic conditions engendered by modern artefacts, has been the constant subject of my teaching' (Illich, 1996). When juxtaposed to the teachings offered by adherents of *dépense*, the differences here become stark. For these relations of friendship are very different from the kind of relation by which *dépense* purports to overcome the precarious isolation of the individual. As per the argument in the previous sub-section, pyramids and potlatches are collective *projects* where the logic of individual acts of consumption are transcribed into a collective key, without any change to the basic structure of the act. By contrast, what friendship speaks of is of being there with others, having no 'project' in view (Desmond, 2016: 377). The common purpose of conviviality refers back to those who hold to it; the common purpose of life would become life in common itself.

While both conviviality and *dépense* break off from the logic of sustainability, the concept of conviviality springs from premises more decisively outside the imaginary of modernity. This implies that it may also be more independent from the modern ideology of consumption. Now, what the ideology of consumption hinges upon is that the isolated individual is taken as a its starting point, and that enjoyment is understood as a solitary phenomenon. As Graeber points out, if this starting point is replaced by one which understands enjoyment as a relational phenomenon, it

is very hard to maintain any notion that the aim of being lies in destruction ('consumption') (Graeber, 2011: 496). Insofar as conviviality leads us to follow Illich in understanding 'the good' as manifest primarily *as* relations of inter-personal friendship, it offers precisely this different starting point.

To conclude, conviviality contrasts with sustainability in that it calls for us to recover a 'sense of being able to celebrate the present and celebrate it by using as little as possible, because it's beautiful, not because it's useful for saving the world [that] could create the dinner table which symbolizes opposition to that macabre dance of ecology, the dinner table where aliveness is consciously celebrated as the opposite of *life*' (in Cayley, 1992: 282; emphasis in original). Consumption is a metaphor for eating, but of a kind that takes place alone (Graeber, 2011). Around the dinner table of Illich, both the aim of sustainability and the problem of consumption have been dissolved.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I make an intervention into debates over the terms appropriate for challenging economic growth. I argue that the term *sustainability* is, in this context, mired in paradox. This paradox consists in a co-constitution of sustainability with that which degrowth-discourse tend to hold as a problem for it, namely consumption. To recapitulate: The notion of human desire as *desire-for-consumption* is connected to a decision to make substantive notions of the good life politically inadmissible. Appeals to *sustainability* gain their force from the value of life. But this tends to be life in and for itself, independent of any notion of a good life. Thus, appeals to sustainability may challenge consumer practices, but they rarely challenge the logic behind the very *idea* of consumption. The logic of this idea is based in an image of desire, in light of which calls for degrowth appear as if they invoke an imperative of survival in order to have us abstain

from the good things in life.

Following from this conclusion, I discuss two concepts – *dépense* and conviviality – which enable critiques of growth which are very different from those which rely on appeals to sustainability. I argue that while *dépense* may indeed escape the paradox of *sustainable* degrowth, it remains bound to the ontology of consumption. Conviviality, in its concern with friendship as an ordering idea for social life, embodies a more thorough break not only with sustainability, but also with consumption.

With the word consumption being a metaphor for eating, perhaps a related metaphor can summarize: If the dominant ideology of consumption understands human fulfilment as realized in eating alone, ‘sustainable’ growth-critique puts us on a strict diet of tasteless powders for the sake of our long-term survival. *Dépense*, instead, would see us eat well, together. But this togetherness would be oriented towards something beyond those gathered together – say, a TV-screen in front of a couch. With conviviality, finally, the locus of human fulfilment is pictured in terms of a dinner around a table, among persons whose faces are oriented towards each other.

In this paper, I offer a piece of knowledge significant for present efforts at developing a coherent language of growth-critique. The critical vantage point which conviviality offers is, I hope, one which will be the subject of much convivial discussion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Corinna Burkhart, Mladen Domazet and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. The research leading to this manuscript was in part supported by a Junior Research Fellowship at the Institute for Political Ecology in Zagreb, Croatia.

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