

# Five principles for a Human Rights Based Approach to De-growth

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## *Abstract*

*In face of deprivation scholars have always meditated on how to generate human wellbeing, mainly in times of colossal gaps between the poor and the rich. In the 18th century Adam Smith presented economic growth as a tool to alleviate deprivation without extensive wealth redistribution. Since then growth became the founding concept of economics, of mainstream economics precisely. However, not only the promises of wellbeing associated with growth have not been fulfilled, as its ecological limits are evident today. How can economics strive for human wellbeing and abandon growth? The first step in that direction is to decolonize the social imaginary of economics, this being the main cross cutting theme of the paper. To achieve this purpose I propose five principles rooted in Human Rights. The principles are: 1) non-utilitarianism; 2) decommodification; 3) decoupling income from work; 4) cultural freedom and; 5) people participation in decision-making. Taken individually, some of the arguments presented in this paper are founded on well-trodden ground by many of the schools of thought competing with mainstream economics. Heterodox approaches of economics have long addressed issues that explicitly or implicitly refer to human rights as a guideline. Nevertheless, these approaches are not structurally built upon human rights and, therefore, the necessary synthesis is yet to be done. Focusing on Human Rights we are led to rethink the relationship between wealth and wellbeing and the role of cultural freedom in this process, wealth and culture being the main thematic axes that structure the paper.*

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## **1. Introduction**

The call for papers for the first conference on de-growth that took place in Paris in April 2008 stated that the level of physical consumption in the North was unsustainable. For that reason it proposed to explore scenarios of collective reduction and redistribution of financial capacity to gain and to use natural resources, within the boundaries of democracy, respect for human rights, ecological soundness and fairness. With this statement the organizers of the conference showed that they were aware of the risk of ecological soundness being achieved on the back of fairness and in disrespect of human rights. Indeed, within a scenario of de-growth many could conclude that development in general, and equitable development in particular, could become out-dated concepts and aspirations. This could put the de-growth philosophy amidst the reactionary ideas and could favour worldwide resistance to the very idea of decoupling growth and development.

The purpose of this paper is to explore institutional principles and tools that allow the conciliation between de-growth and equitable development grounded on human rights based political economy. In other words we will discuss the ways in which a human rights based political economy can at the same time respect ecological soundness and social equity. The key issue in this respect concerns the fact that within human rights based political economy welfare is no longer the result of economic growth, as it ensues from the mainstream vision of development, but of justice.

Paraphrasing the United Nations definition of a human rights-based approach to development, a human rights-based political economy would be a conceptual framework for socioeconomic analysis that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting them (Robinson 2006: 303). In its essence, a human rights-based approach integrates the norms, standards and principles of the international human rights system into economic theory and policy. These standards can be found chiefly in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and in what have been called the seven core treaties, of which the most relevant for our purpose are the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The scope of these rights range from the fulfilment of material aspirations, such as the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their family, to the enjoyment of immaterial amenities such as freedom of speech or of religion.

Somehow this was also the idea of the French revolutionaries of 1789 when they wrote in the preamble of the declaration of the rights of man and the citizen that:

The representatives of the French People, formed into a National Assembly, considering ignorance, forgetfulness or contempt of the rights of man to be the only causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of Governments, have resolved to set forth, in a solemn Declaration, the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man.

Within a Human Rights Based Approach rights are considered simultaneously means and ends of development. In short we will try to show how securing human rights and promoting degrowth can be mutually reinforcing. To achieve this purpose I propose five principles rooted in Human Rights requirements. These principles are: 1) non-utilitarianism); 2) decommodification; 3) decoupling income from work; 4) cultural freedom and; 5) people participation in decision-making. Taken individually, some of the arguments presented in this paper are founded on well-trodden ground by many of the schools of thought competing with mainstream economics. Heterodox approaches of economics have long addressed issues that explicitly or implicitly refer to human rights as a guideline. Nevertheless, these approaches are not structurally built upon human rights and, therefore, the necessary synthesis is yet to be done. Focusing on Human Rights we are led to rethink the relationship between wealth and wellbeing.

## **2. Non-utilitarianism**

Despite the fact that mainstream economics cannot be considered homogenous, some elements can be considered foundational of its identity. Mainstream economics, then, is an individualistic, utilitarian, and equilibrium-driven approach, obsessed with mathematical formalization and dogmatically believing in the virtues of the market and in the naturalistic driving force of economic behaviour. Let us start by its utilitarian

character. Utilitarianism is a moral theory according to which an action is right if it conforms to the principle of utility. An action will therefore conform to this principle if and only if its performance will be more productive of pleasure or happiness, or more preventive of pain or unhappiness, than any alternative (Mautner 2005), in other words if the utility of an action is greater than its disutility.

Logically utilitarians will look to obtain the maximum amount of pleasure in society, in other words to maximize aggregate utility. This is the foundational purpose of utilitarianism, of hedonist utilitarianism to be more precise. Aggregate utility is the total utility that a society gains from a certain action, or economic choice in this case. The aggregate utility of a choice for a society as a whole is, therefore, the sum of the utility gains for those positively impacted, less the total disutility experienced by those negatively impacted by this same choice. This is based on a cardinal conception of utility, in other words on the likelihood of measuring the magnitude of individual utility and, thus, on the possibility of adding it up. Maximizing aggregate utility is, then, a theoretical exercise that consists in ensuring as much as possible that gains outweigh losses in society. If, as a consequence of this exercise, gains grow more than losses, this will conform to the principle of utility and we can say that society will be better off.

In economic terms this exercise demands gains and losses to be rigorously accounted. Mainstream economics thought to have solved the problem of calculating social gains with the concept of Gross Domestic Product, maximizing gains becoming from then on promoting economic growth. However, not only the promises of wellbeing associated with growth are far from having been fulfilled, as the method for calculating losses leaves much to be desired. First ecological limits to growth and social costs of economic activity are manifestly underrated and, second, if instead of mere losses we talk of human rights, the growth exercise may result in rights violations.

In his seminal work, *Taking Rights Seriously*, Ronald Dworkin (1978) considered human rights as being essentially a mechanism protecting minorities from decisions taken by majorities for their own profit, but resulting in a loss for the former. This definition is crucial because it implies that the improvement of one part of the world, for example, cannot be rightfully pursued at the expense of the material, cultural, environmental and spiritual deterioration of another part, let alone if this constitutes its weakest link. This principle intrinsically collides with mainstream utilitarian approach. Furthermore, depriving an individual from a particular right, or simply reducing its enjoyment, affects negatively not only that very individual but also the entire community, even if the majority of the members of that community are better off.

As opposed to aggregate utility, the degree in which a right is guaranteed cannot always be measured by the sum of the number of individuals enjoying it, but rather by the degree in which the purpose of that right is guaranteed for every individual. The degree of democratic participation, for instance, cannot be measured by the number of individuals benefiting from the right to vote, but rather by the extent of the decisions that are submitted to the scrutiny of all. Arbitrarily denying an individual the right to vote is equivalent to denying it to the whole of the community; even if, taken one by one, no other citizen seems to be affected. In this case, thus, arbitrary deprivation of the right to vote of an individual not only affects the maximization of democracy but can also represent a deprivation of democracy for the community as a whole.

The consequentialist dimension of utilitarianism triggers another conflict with human rights. Following Jeremy Bentham, utilitarianism holds that the rightness of an action entirely depends on the value of its consequences (Bentham 1781), meaning that only the consequences should be taken into account and not the character of the act itself. Human Rights approach to action, on the contrary, bares procedural or deontological concerns, while not completely ignoring consequences (Reddy 2011), in other words gives greater importance to the character of the act itself. Justice of means is as important as nobility of ends. The consequentialist approach is actually applied by mainstream economics in valuing human rights themselves. Take for instance the numerous works on the relationship between democracy and economic performance (see for example Olson 1993; Goldsmith 1995; Barro 1996 and Kaufman et al. 1999). What is at stake here is the value given to the consequences of adopting rights, in this case democracy, rather than their intrinsic value. Human rights language, on the contrary, holds that actions and choices should be judged on the basis of their adherence to particular rules or norms, rather than their outcomes (Seymour and Pincus 2008: 389). This would actually be one of the main reasons why rights are not intrinsically important for mainstream economics, as Amartya Sen (1993) pointed out.

Because utilitarianism leads to growth and is contradictory to human rights, a human rights-based approach constitutes a valuable framework for degrowth. Two characteristics of human rights are key for this purpose, satiety and non-additivity. First, in mainstream economic theory wants are taken to be insatiable, there is no foreseen limit to what an individual may want and therefore more is better, an appetite that demands perpetual growth, even if it is met only ephemerally. Human rights on the contrary are satiable. Once a given threshold has been attained in satisfying human rights more is not forcibly better. Growth becomes then unnecessary for improving human wellbeing.

Second, as said before, maximizing aggregate utility through growth is conditioned to the additivity of gains possibility. Contrary to utilitarianism, human rights rest on the impossibility of additivity. This is the essence of the principle of indivisibility of rights. The interchangeability of preferences within the more modern ordinal utilitarianism also contradicts this principle of indivisibility of rights. It is meaningless to compensate the non-compliance of a right with the fulfillment of another. Indeed, it seems quite evident that more education serves no purpose for someone who cannot get enough food to survive. Considering both material wellbeing and a healthy environment as human rights, economic growth achieved at the expense of ecological harm will be interpreted likewise.

Another important aspect of a human rights based approach concerns offering an alternative vision to utilitarian consequentialism. This alternative vision is based on two main principles or purposes. First, on the notion of procedural utility that argues that that people value not only outcomes but also the conditions and processes leading to outcomes (Benz and Frey 2008); second, on the idea of human rights impact assessment (see Balakrishnan and Elson 2008; Maastricht Guidelines on Violations of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1997). Human rights impact assessment is a methodology that aims to reveal the unintended consequences of proposed regulations, policies, and programs on the enjoyment of human rights (MacNaughton and Frey 2011).

There is yet no human rights impact assessment tool designed specifically to assess and monitor impacts on all human rights, but several generic examples of human rights impact assessments can be of use (see for example Abrahams and Wyss 2010). These are

mechanisms designed to ensure that, on the one hand, human rights implications of a policy are considered when developing it or to assess the impact of a certain policy on the situation of rights holders after it has been implemented (Baxewanos and Raza 2013), and, on the other hand, to allow human rights risks and impacts to be incorporated systematically in corporate management processes (Abrahams and Wyss 2010).

Human Rights Impact Assessment is not a tool for weighing economic and human rights costs and benefits but for identifying pre-existing human rights obligations that prevail over any other obligation (United Nations, Human Rights Council 2011: 5). In this sense procedural utility and human rights impact assessment provide a common language to the protection of both the environment and human rights. One of the reasons for the conflicts between economics and human rights is based precisely on the fact that their languages are themselves conflicting (see Branco 2009). This conflict also extends to the languages of economics and of the environment.

### **3. Decommodification**

As said before, one of the key characteristics of mainstream economics is that ideally, exchanging goods and services takes place in a market, where both suppliers and demanders seek to meet their respective private interests, the equilibrium between each positions being reached by the means of price adaptability. In fact, the dominant theory admits an exception for public goods and services, but goods and services necessary to secure human rights seldom fall in the strict public goods category. Some can be considered private, and some fall in intermediate categories usually named common pool or toll goods, where rivalry combines with non-exclusion in the first case, and exclusion combines with non-rivalry in the second. Consequently, most goods and services necessary to secure human rights can in principle be exchanged according to market rules, and from the point of view of mainstream theory, if they can they should, with advantage for all.

Exchanging in a market presupposes that the goods traded are necessarily provided with exchange value. As a matter of fact mainstream economics is basically the science of producing and trading exchange value, in other words the science of producing and trading commodities. This is precisely what Alfred Marshall claimed in his *Principles of Economics* when he wrote that:

Economic laws, or statements of economic tendencies, are those social laws which relate to branches of conduct in which the strength of the motives chiefly concerned can be measured by a money price (Marshall 1890).

There is nothing wrong with this approach. There is nothing wrong indeed with a particular scientific discipline narrowing its object to phenomena that can be measured by a money price and refrain from studying those that cannot. The problem about this sort of economics comes when it tries to put a price tag on everything. When it considers human rights as commodities, and market rules as the right mechanism to secure them, particularly economic and social rights.

At first glance there seems to be some general agreement in human rights and economics literature that, if unregulated, markets fail to secure economic and social rights (Freeman 2002, 149). Since the concept of merit goods was proposed in the late 1950s (Musgrave

1959) even mainstream pro-market scholars believe that the market should not be the main responsible for securing economic and social rights. In reality, though, there is a wider range of perspectives. Some scholars argue not only that markets cannot secure human rights (Petrella 2001; Halperin 2004), but also that they can be blamed for creating the conditions that made human rights necessary (Donnelly 2002) and even that they may oppose to human rights (Held et al. 1999; Seymour and Pincus 2008). For some others, on the contrary, this is a question that probably should not even be raised, as people already satisfy many of their economic and social rights through markets, paying market prices for food or shelter, for instance (Osiatynski 2007). In the case of the human rights to water and to social security, for example, there are voices that argue that private provision is not only possible (Bakker 2007; World Bank 2012) but also virtuous (Kotlikoff 1996; Rogers et al. 2002; Bailey 2005; Segerfeldt 2005) if properly regulated.

The consequences of commodifying human rights are twofold. On the one hand, it transforms the relation between the recipient and the provider of human rights into a commercial relation (see Carvalho and Rodrigues 2008). A commercial relation connects a buyer and a seller who exchange goods and services in return for a certain amount of money with the purpose of maximising utility in the case of the former and profit in the case of the latter. In human rights' discourse the nature of the relation is quite different. In the language of human rights the rights of individuals correspond to duties of other individuals or institutions, and, thus, wherever there is a right of an individual, there is a duty to provide institutional protection to this right. In this case, therefore, the recipient is considered a rights holder rather than a mere client, and the provider a duty bearer rather than a mere merchant.

Furthermore, the fact that some individuals are not able to buy what they wish at market prices on account of a tight budget, and consequently are excluded from consumption is of no concern for the market. If an individual cannot afford automobiles or designer shoes, the market should not worry about this and neither should human rights. However, if the goods and services being exchanged are necessary to secure human rights, the market fails to meet the condition of universality. This condition tells us that no individual should be excluded from the enjoyment of human rights. Markets do not meet the condition of equality either. The fact that an individual can afford more automobiles or designer shoes than another still does not constitute a concern, neither for the market nor for human rights, but none of this should be tolerable when human rights are at stake. Indeed, one cannot accept that some individuals may deposit more votes in the ballot box than others, for instance. Needless to remind that universal suffrage, confers one, and only one, vote to every citizen of age.

Commodification not only fails in meeting human rights requirements but also contradicts ecological soundness and fosters the need for growth. Within market economy natural resources and even pollution are transformed into commodities, subject to sale, to supply and demand (Gerber and Gerber 2017: 552). Commodification also encourages growth. Within a commodified economy individuals trade exchange value. The purpose of trading exchange value as Marx himself pointed out (Marx 1867) is to obtain more exchange value and theoretically there is no limit to the accumulation of exchange value. In fact, this process feeds on itself as commodification requires growth and growth requires even more commodification. The commodification of many informal exchanges such as care is a good example of this drift.

Decommodification becomes naturally an alternative combining human rights

requirements and ecological soundness. The concept of decommodification was first introduced by Gosta Esping-Andersen for whom decommodification "occurs when a service is rendered as a matter of a right and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market" (Esping-Andersen 1990: 21-2). Although they didn't explicitly use this terminology, the concept of decommodification was already present in the works of Karl Polanyi (1944) and Karl William Kapp (1978 (1950)) for instance. Polanyi and Kapp were worried about the consequences for society of the necessary commodification of work and of human needs under capitalist rule. The marketization of society and growing social costs were the natural consequences of this commodification, paving the way to compromising human livelihoods. According to Esping-Andersen, the decommodification of certain goods and services via social protection was implemented by the welfare state precisely to protect individuals from the exclusive reliance on the market induced by a commodified society.

The decommodification process should not stop at goods and services necessary to secure human rights, though; it should also concern economics itself. First, decommodification asks for an economics that is no longer focused exclusively on phenomena that can be measured by a money price, and therefore an economics that not only can study phenomena that are averse to monetization, but also and above all an economics that does not try to put a price tag on everything. Second, decommodifying economics means recognizing that value production can occur outside the market (see Harribey 2008). One of the main reasons why the affordability of rights issue comes up frequently in public debate is that traditional economics does not assign the same character to the value held by rights and by marketable goods and services. From this viewpoint financing the provision of rights would only be achieved through a retrenchment on the value generated in the market sphere. Rights, rather than adding, would subtract to market value. Assuming that significant value, i.e. contributing to human wellbeing, can be produced outside the market, which means valuing use value as much as exchange value, can relieve pressure on the sector producing exchange value and, thus, on growth.

#### **4. Decoupling Income from Work**

In mainstream economics labour is taken as a resource, and like for any other resource suppliers and demanders are supposed to meet in a market to exchange it. Within this framework workers sell labour and capital owners buy it, the wage, or the salary, being the price mediating the transaction. Labour is an input and therefore a cost. It is, then, quite logical for the buyer to look for using work as little as possible. In a world relentlessly pursuing efficiency where cars spend less petrol, home appliances use less electricity and communications take less time, a particular economic activity would logically aim at employing fewer people for a constant output. Within this discourse there is not much room for such an ideal as providing a job for everyone, the main purpose of the human right to work. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) proclaims "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment". The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), that gave legal force to the UDHR, states, in turn, that "the States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts".

The right to work was born of the need to protect the weakest link in the labour transaction (see Branco 2018), in other words the workers. Mainstream economics, on the contrary, has since long clearly taken the side of the employers. David George, for example, detected in articles published in the New York Times since 1900 that money going to labour is twice more likely to be called cost than salary, wage or earnings (George 2013: 94). Let us not forget that if wages are a cost for employers they are a benefit for employees. The way wages are supposed to be determined in mainstream theory adds yet another argument to the understanding of its conflict.

The UDHR states that "Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity", and the ICESCR recognizes the right of everyone to a remuneration that provides all workers with a decent living for themselves and their families. In the mainstream view, wages depend theoretically on the supply and demand of labour. The demand of labour, in other words the number of jobs available, depends in turn on the marginal productivity of labour. The higher this marginal productivity, the higher the demand and, therefore, all things being equal, such as supply, the higher the wages.

In this language, wages remunerate the performance of a task and depend on how productive that performance is. In the language of the human right to work, on the contrary, wages, and especially minimum wages, are primarily seen as the income necessary to satisfy the needs of workers and their families regardless of their performance. Furthermore, the mainstream vision is not only detrimental to human rights but also to the prospect of degrowth. Within this view the only way workers can improve their wages is by enhancing their productivity, in other words by fostering economic growth. Growth would, therefore, be crucial not only to procure more jobs but also to improve workers wellbeing.

An economics favourable to both the right to work and degrowth must reverse the logic of mainstream economics and consider work an asset rather than a cost and, instead of dealing with it as an item that can be bought and sold in a market, proceed to its decommodification. This should not be very hard to consider. Labour has not historically been treated like a commodity; this is a distinctive feature of capitalism. And just as once work came to be treated as a commodity it is perfectly conceivable that one day it could stop being treated as such. The decommodification of work demands that its allocation should no longer be determined by a price mechanism, that the very notion of a labour market should be abandoned. In order to conform to a human rights language the usual interaction of supply and demand in a labour market should be substituted by a rights holder and duty bearer relation. Decommodification of work means also decoupling the income needed to ensure a life with dignity from work. More than that, getting an income should no longer be the main reason for working.

Decoupling income from work is not about giving up the centrality of work in society, a critical element of the right to work, but about giving up the centrality of the market. In a market, along the utilitarian logic, an individual obtains utility in return for disutility; he or she gets hold of the utility attached to goods and services by accepting to give up the utility of holding money. According to mainstream theory, utility is, thus, obtained in the consumption sphere. Logically, disutility should be endured in the opposite sphere, where income is obtained, which is to say at work (Méda 1995; Perret 1995; Lane 1994). This principle that considers work as disutility, and therefore as a counterpart of consumer utility, is very clearly stated in Genesis 3.19, for instance, when it claims that

‘you shall eat your bread in the sweat of your face’, as much as in the modern accounting systems, where for each asset there is a corresponding liability (Lane 1994: 26). The conclusion is that, in order to enjoy the utility offered by the consumption of goods and services, one is obliged to endure a disutility, which is to work. The assumption of disutility is also present in principal-agents models, in which work takes the form of provision of effort that workers try to avoid by ‘shirking’ (Lopes 2016: 3).

Decoupling income from work would precisely contribute to take work out of the disutility domain and fully anchor it in the realm of rights. The welfare state in general has partly contributed to this process by allowing an individual to maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market, rendering services such as education and health a matter of right, and ensuring an income to inactive individuals through retirement pensions, for instance. One of the criticisms about decoupling income from work is that it would be a disincentive to work and therefore a pathway to global deprivation. However, many experiences of introducing a basic unconditional income have shown that people have not indulged into idleness, which tends to show that an activity can also contribute to self-realization and personal achievement, this constituting a sufficient incentive to the provision of goods and services necessary for life (see for example BIG Coalition Namibia 2014).

Decoupling income from work opens the possibility of human wellbeing to free itself from work and its improvement from growth. Reducing working time emerges, then, as another tool to conciliate the human right to work and degrowth. An extensive reduction of working time complemented by some form of remuneration such as an unconditional basic income would allow more people to share the same or even a smaller work load, without radically affecting their material wellbeing, which in turn would promote degrowth, because people working less could produce less. French economist Marcel Maréchal states that, since the end of the nineteenth century, job creation in France has been, precisely, the outcome of working time reduction, not of economic growth. Here, between 1949 and 1991, the truly active population rose by 16.5%, from 19.074 million to 22.204 million people (Maréchal, 1999: 203). However, according to Marcel Maréchal, these 3.16 million jobs were mainly created thanks to the reduction in the average annual working time per worker, which in the same period decreased from 1952 to 1537 hours, confirming, as a matter of fact, an historical trend, as in 1837 the average annual work time summed up to 3041 hours (Maréchal, 1999: 203-205).

## **5. Cultural Freedom**

In 2001 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) approved a document entitled Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in which cultural diversity is regarded as an ethical imperative inseparable from respect for the dignity of the individual, as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature (UNESCO 2002) and cultural rights taken as an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent. In the following year the United Nations Committee on Human Rights approved the first-ever resolution on cultural rights entitled "Promotion of the enjoyment of the cultural rights of everyone and respect for different cultural identities", henceforth widening human rights language to cultural identity. In order to avoid misunderstandings, culture shall be taken here as the shared knowledge, values, beliefs and attitudes transmitted from generation to generation, which are at the foundation of order and sense, and which allow the members of a community

to behave in a convenient and acceptable manner, or at least an understandable one (De Kadt 1999). In other words culture is way of thinking that justifies a way of living (Douglas 2004).

Cultural freedom is, about allowing people the right to choose their identities and to lead the lives they value, without being excluded from other choices important to them, such as education, health or job opportunities (UNDP 2004: 6). In other words, cultural freedom is about preventing exclusion based on culture and therefore about striving for cultural diversity. It should be stressed that cultural diversity in itself is not a necessary condition for cultural freedom, in the same way as freedom of political choice does not necessarily demand the participation in elections of a myriad political formations. Nevertheless, it seems to be common sense that without cultural diversity some personal choices may become impracticable.

The various material constituents of wellbeing have long been considered economic resources in development theory and practice. Despite the fact that there is no undisputable evidence automatically relating the endowment of material resources and economic performance, conventional wisdom tends to suggest that the more resources the better. Immaterial constituents such as culture, however, have not been usually treated likewise. In Max Weber (1958 (1905); 1964 (1915)), Margaret Mead (1953), Irma Adelman and Cynthia Morris (1967) and modernization theorists such as Walt Whitman Rostow (1960) and Gunnar Myrdal (1968), to name only these, culture was more often taken as a liability rather than as an asset and, consequently, cultural change was placed at the heart of economic development, usually reduced to economic growth. More recently, Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington (2000) Douglass North (2004 [1990]), David Landes (1999) or Deepak Lal (1999), gave a new momentum to this approach.

Culture would then be a constraint on economic performance (Lal, 1999; North, 2004), and thus the main generator of differences between countries' economic performances (Landes, 1999). Samuel Huntington, for instance, argues that the reason why South Korea joined the developed world and Ghana did not, despite these countries having displayed comparable levels of development in the early 1960s, can be explained by the differences in the values shared by their respective national communities (Huntington, 2000: *xiii*). Addressing the concept of social capital, considered a lubricant of economic efficiency, Francis Fukuyama says that not all shared values produce social capital because some values might be wrong (Fukuyama 2000: 99). Daniel Etounga-Manguelle (2000) went so far as to claim that Africa needed a cultural adjustment in order to overcome the obstacles standing before the continent's development.

In the so-called traditional societies symbolic imperatives would frequently outclass economic ones, and therefore, the poorest amongst the world's population would seem to be the least interested in material wellbeing. In other words the victims and the felons of underdevelopment would be exactly the same. Moreover, these societies would focus on the past and present, not on the future. As Lawrence Harrison puts it 'progressive cultures emphasize the future; static cultures emphasize the present and the past' (Harrison 2000: 299). This cultural deterministic discourse is contradictory to both human rights and degrowth. On the one hand by taking some cultures as an obstacle to economic performance and their rejection as a condition to development, mainstream economics fetters cultural diversity. On the other hand, mainstream economics promotes a productivist culture within which attitudes not conducive to growth end up being classified as retrograde.

An economics favourable to cultural freedom should avoid the definition of superior and inferior cultures, and propose a renewed dialogue between culture and economics by internalizing the cultural plurality that is necessary to give sense to cultural freedom. The first step of this renewed dialogue is to insist on the chances of finding an original development path rather than on identifying and sweeping away the obstacles to the traditional mode of development; the second step is to construct an alternative set of premises to the dominant system of knowledge production. In this alternative set of premises culture is considered a technique to incorporate change in opposition to an obstacle to change. In the following lines we will present an example of how culture can be a critical tool to manage ecological soundness, allowing the reconciliation of human wellbeing, cultural identity, and absence of growth, built from a survey made in Timor Leste in 2012 (Henriques et al. 2012).

If a productive use of land is key to satisfy basic needs a non-productive use is also crucial for cultural and ecological reasons. Indeed, on many occasions Timorese culture requires, most especially in rural areas, a non-productive use of natural resources. This is basically the essence of the *sacred land* principle. Sacred land can be summed up, here, in the *lulik* occupation of land. *Lulik* grounds are characterised by their sacred status, associated taboos and rules of behaviour and management. For most Timorese land is core to all spirituality, this connection being central in issues of great significance to people's everyday life. Timor-Leste's cosmology itself is inextricably tied to the perception of land as a sacred entity. Spirits of nature, such as *Rai Nains* (spirits owners of the land) and the *Bée Nains* (water lords) are central because they are supposed to help people in protecting and accessing water and food. Throughout Timor-Leste, in order to guarantee the goodwill of these spirits, communities perform several rituals and ceremonies in their honour with a "propitiatory" nature (before sowing, after harvest, in the case of pests, to ask for rain to come or for rain to stop, etc.).

Even technological innovations imported by the community need to be ritually integrated into the local culture. Ground considered *lulik* can vary from a few trees to a mountain range, and their boundaries may not be fixed. Along the lines of cultural determinism these practices would certainly be classified as obstacles to development. However, if one believes that the development process implies more than just reaching material advancement, these practices become an intrinsic part of this same process. Furthermore, if one considers that the use of natural resources also needs to be compatible with ecological soundness, culture can become a tool to achieve this. *Tara Bandu*, for example, contributes, to the preservation of forests, mountains and other geographical formations, without jeopardizing the productive function. This function of culture is all the more crucial that unsustainable exploitation of resources is historically responsible for the near disappearance of sandalwood, Timor-Leste's historically most renowned richness.

According to Demetrio do Amaral de Carvalho from Haburas Foundation, and winner of the Goldman Prize in 2004, *Tara Bandu* is an East Timor tradition, a customary law recognized as traditional ecological wisdom. It involves a kind of agreement within a community to protect a special area for a period of time; usually it prohibits the use of certain areas taken as sacred, but is not exclusively applicable to sacred sites (Carvalho, 2004). Prohibitions usually concern harvesting crops, cutting trees, collecting forest products and hunting or fishing. In essence, *Tara Bandu* is a custom that regulates the relationship between human beings and the environment in Timor-Leste. Ritual

prohibitions, or *Tara Bandu*, are widespread throughout Timor; however, the ways in which they are applied and the terms employed to describe it vary across the territory.

Sacred sites contribute significantly to preserving areas around water sources or forests ecologically useful to maintain water flows and avoid erosion. More importantly, they contribute to maintaining biological diversity. In this sense culture in general, and sacred land in particular, becomes simultaneously an objective in improving people's wellbeing and a means for securing ecosystem services that are fundamental for securing this same people's wellbeing. Beyond its use for resource management, *Tara Bandu*, is also important for communities to exercise *de facto* governance and ownership rights over areas of "social tenure" (Wallace 2007). Protecting sacred places in general in Timor-Leste can also be critical to strengthen its cultural identity and status as a sovereign nation (see Palmer and Carvalho 2014).

Jackson and Palmer (2015) show how Australian indigenous people have been claiming to be recognized for their traditional land and sea management knowledge and practices and also refer to *Tara Bandu* as a similar case (Jackson and Palmer 2015: 123-125). Timorese authorities and international donors, including the World Bank (McWilliam et al. 2014: 314), by way of formalizing and "paying" for communities to carry out *Tara Bandu*, have actually recognized this role. Sacred land is also, and perhaps above all, a powerful instrument of social regulation and cohesion. The loss of important ceremonial practices contributes to weakening social relations in the community; to be able to express their faith and their values, namely by performing traditional ceremonies in public demonstrations, increases people's feeling of security and reduces their vulnerability. Sacred land is not really about degrowth in Timor Leste, though. Some growth is still needed as the country ranked 132 in Gross National Income among 188 countries in 2016 (UNDP 2016), but it assuredly contributes to decolonize the idea of human progress from growth, even in a poor country.

## **6. People Participation in Decision-making**

A substantively democratic society demands not only that citizens must participate in the making of decisions that concern them but also that decisions must not be served wrapped in a shroud of ignorance. Otherwise, rather than participation, we could actually be talking about manipulation. In a substantively democratic society, therefore, scientific and democratic rationalities can and should be complementary, scientific rationality being given a crucial role in delivering information to support democratic decision. Unfortunately, when mainstream economics is involved this complementarity can easily be converted into conflict; in other words, instead of informing people economic science may exclude them.

If one of the main purposes of economics, for instance, is to find the optimal solution for a particular problem affecting the economy, then by definition that solution is the only one society should rationally adopt, dismissing thereby democratic debate. Within this frame, the enforcement of economic laws does not even constitute a decision per se insofar as it does not reflect a choice. In a world in which to each problem corresponds only one best solution democratic debate is pointless, and putative economic laws, which interfere with people's everyday life, become by definition excused of democratic legitimacy.

The preponderance of technical arguments for supporting public decisions and the use and abuse of scientific rationality leads to yet another form of marginalization of democracy. Because the complexity of the problems affecting modern economies implies increasing intellectual difficulty in dealing with them, lay people may eventually be crowded out from decision processes. This complexity argument has frequently been used to legitimate the transfer of decisions on matters that affect the community from the hands of elected representatives of the people to those of individuals holding the required knowledge to address them, the experts. No matter whether this complexity is self-generated; 95% of economics would be common sense made to look difficult by the use of jargon and mathematics claims Ha-Joon Chang (2011).

As western societies have become allegedly too complicated for a parliament, or any other public institution, to gather the qualifications needed to deliberate on relevant matters, parliamentary systems have been progressively marginalized in modern politics, numerous policy conceptions and applications being produced nowadays within thousands of consulting agencies and law firms (Burns 2000; Goanec 2013). We have been witnessing the production of an ideology of competence (see Gonçalves 1996; Maréchal 2006) according to which mere citizens, and inclusively politicians, are thought incapable of understanding the high complexity of social and economic reality and must resign themselves to delegate the power of producing decisions to a caste of experts. Mainstream experts will ground their proposals on mainstream theory, which not only contradicts people participation, because that would lead to bad decision-making, but also enshrines growth as we have already seen. An alternative articulation of knowledge and decision-making with the double aim of promoting people participation and degrowth is, therefore, needed. In this particular case ecological economists, for instance, have been since long internalizing different forms of people participation in policy and research formulation that could contribute to this double objective.

Most of the time mainstream economists operate as puzzle solving technicians within the framework of the dominant paradigm, without challenging the underlying assumptions of this paradigm. One of these assumptions is that such routine puzzle solving by experts provides an adequate knowledge base for decision-making in the real world (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993; Funtowicz 2004). In doing so they are practicing what Thomas Kuhn (1962) called normal science. According to this approach, conventional science is characterized by its search for eliminating existing uncertainties and sweeping away elements of subjectivity. However, in the real world, economic problems encompass uncertainty, value loading, and a plurality of legitimate perspectives (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993). Ignoring this in decision-making processes not only affects the appropriateness of decisions but also its legitimacy by excluding concerned people from participating in such processes.

While it is probably necessary to change the current paradigm in economics with the purpose of promoting a more substantive democracy, this may not suffice as economists could continue to operate puzzle solving, only under a different paradigm. In other words they could continue practicing normal science as if nothing had happened. In addition to a paradigm shift, a pro-substantive democracy economics also requires the use of a different conception of science. Principles of post-normal science and deliberative ecological economics emerge logically as alternatives.

Post-normal science, by contrast with normal science, stands for a strategy of problem solving that accepts uncertainty and the various valuations and perspectives on the

problems in question (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993). Where facts are uncertain, values are in dispute and the stakes are high, post-normal science advocates what it calls extended peer review. This means the inclusion of laypersons, such as citizens and other non-experts, understood not just as a matter of expanding participatory democracy, but also as a legitimate contribution to the co-production of knowledge. These extended peer communities, materialize in different forms, such as citizens' juries, focus groups or consensus conferences. Knowledge produced exclusively by specialists is, consequently, replaced by a co-production of knowledge involving the community at large, in other words instead of excluding democracy this approach of science reclaims it.

A step further in integrating democracy and economics with this purpose has been given by the deliberative ecological economics approach. As Zografos and Howarth declare, deliberative processes are likely to generate decisions that are more acceptable, hence effective. Excluding decision-making processes, on the contrary, tend to be perceived as illegitimate and therefore can meet resistance (Zografos and Howarth 2010, 3406). The fact that the above-mentioned approaches concern almost exclusively ecological economics is also demonstrative of the strong will of ecological economists to engage in paradigmatic change.

This approach of science in general and of economics in particular is not concerned exclusively with the democratic legitimation of decisions, though. The main goal is still to produce an adequate answer to a problem. It happens that within this approach democracy becomes simultaneously a means and an end of the process of making an adequate decision. In other words a decision is said to be adequate not only because it gives an appropriate answer to a particular issue but also because it involves the significant participation of the people concerned by the outcome of this same decision. A human rights-based approach to degrowth argues that people participation is crucial not only to legitimate the choice of degrowth but also to reinforce democracy.

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