

## **Managing Degrowth: is this an oxymoron?**

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Organization and management are two words that define patterns of economic production in the world today. In this sense they are axiomatic to the growing economic development paradigm. Would it be possible to attain a convivial degrowth society avoiding to confront these patterns? What should be done: to transform them or to dismiss them? This paper takes degrowth as a frame of reference to critically access mainstream practices of organization and management in order to open the Pandora box of alternatives of organizing and managing.

Today, labor organization defines the equation of relative times that makes the system functional to the reproduction of capital. Technology and innovation are both driven by the imperative of accumulation. Management techniques are designed to remove the obstacles for this advancement and to diffuse a “surpass yourself” ideology. The so called “management sciences” are thus closely related to the growing pattern of economic development and the constitution of the adjusted subject that supports it – the colonization of the imaginary.

Management defines a set of organizational techniques operating the fluidity of technological advancement to maximize surplus value, and settling the emergent conflicts intertwined to this fluidity. The paper elaborates a critique of these operating functions to disclose the potential subversion of “resistances” and “non conformities” to organization and management. The discussion will focus the possible convergence of different resistant and non-conformity worker’s practices as pathways to the realization of a degrowth socioeconomic order in the South in general and Brazil in particular.

Management can be seen as an approach to the problem of governance that naturalizes capitalist relations as inevitable, through a combination of ideology and technocracy, taught throughout the globe (also) in business schools, fostering a

progressive account of the modern world, relying on the promise of technology, choice, plenty and wealth (Parker, 2018). It attributes needs to human beings through an analysis tool called “organizational behavior”, positing that people “calculate their preferences and make decisions about action accordingly”, very similarly to the *homo oeconomicus*, that Parker calls ‘rational egoists’ (Parker, 2018; 35). That is a part of what Ramos (1989) called ‘cognitive politics’ - the conscious use of a distorted language with the goal of causing people to interpret reality in the terms which are adequate to the interests of the (direct or indirect) agents of such distortion. It aims to identify ‘modernization’ with the spreading institutional and psychological requisites of the market, fostering a process through which the people are faded to lose their homebred craftsmanship, of the shrinking and disappearance of the vernacular, fading into shadow work<sup>1</sup> and becoming dependent on industrial commodities (Illich, 1981).

Management spreads the idea that the formal bureaucratic organization, being the most efficient, is the best means of achieving organizational goals, modeling organization studies as a positivist applied social science – as positivism and science became more powerful through the 1950s and 60s (Mardsen and Townley, 2001). Organizing and organization theory, however, don’t have to focus on managing a work process. Management implies that managers are always necessary in organizations (Parker, 2018). Organizing, however, can and often needs to be done in non-managerial ways, characterizing alternative types of organization (Parker, Cheney, Fournier & Land, 2014), and in our view such thought on organizing is adequate in order to escape from the economy as the degrowth project intends to do (Latouche, 2009), organizing has a political and vital tone that management tries to dial down – as well as an intuitive one, as the Invisible Committee (2017, p. 17) has put it, “organizing ourselves has never been anything else than loving each other.”

Management has also been used as a tool in the spread of industrialism and growth societies to the global South through Development, that is, the expansion of the realm of scarcity (Esteva, 1992). Its use is evidenced, for instance, by Development Administration and Management (DAM) used by international agencies such as the World Bank as a tool for intervention by the so-called First World in political processes of the “Third World”, taking economic growth as a means of reducing poverty as a goal and establishing a particular, neo-liberal political economic order (Cooke, 2004). That is done under the premise that human beings have a universal set of needs for standard services and goods that are industrially manufactured, disabling their abilities to do things on their own and

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1 The work necessary to make industrial products useful.

making them clients to the process, deemed to be the best there is, as judged by a morals of technique itself (Illich, 1992; Ellul, 1968). Management implies the logic of growth societies. Claims such as that of Victor and Rosenbluth (2007) for “managing without growth”, that argue in the name of full employment and poverty eradication don’t seem to grasp this central point for reaching convivial degrowth societies.

Management as a tool of organizing colonizes the social imaginary through a “surpass yourself” ideology. Through ideas such as “coaching” or “personal marketing”, to name a few, people become entrepreneurs of themselves, thinking their way through life as though they themselves were businesses. According to Han (2015), society in our century is no longer the Foucaultian disciplinary one, where we are oppressed by the other from outside, but rather a performance society, where its subjects become ones of performance and production – we oppress ourselves from within. Performance is a new way of domination, with advertisers capturing our desires (much like Latouche (2009) had pointed out), ours is a society of fitness gyms, and management’s *clichés* of “getting out of the comfort zone”. Everything becomes a matter of projects, including ourselves – people have internalized the imperative of *maximizing production*, leading us to be perpetually exhausted and sensing to be getting left behind, leading to anxiety and depression. These analyses can be connected to the critique of systems, the disembodiment produced by them and their blinding of proportional limits that was advanced in the later works of Ivan Illich, which is commonly overlooked in the degrowth debate, as pointed out by Samerski (2016).

In the early seventies, Ivan Illich advanced a social critique based on the use of tools and their classification as convivial or industrial, advancing the idea of an imbalance among the autonomous and the heteronomous spheres of production, leading to paradoxical counterproductivity (Illich, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1978) – the medical enterprise sickens, schools make us dumb, transportation stops us from moving. However, in his later work, he recognized the dawn of a new age in which tools no longer prevailed, the distance between user and tool – the *distality* - had been erased as the first was “swallowed” by the later, being reified herself to be a tool, thought of as part of a larger system, in the cybernetic sense of the word. More than that, we ourselves become immunological *systems*, unable to feel our own state of being, dependent on diagnosis done by professionals unaccessible to our senses - disembodied (Illich, 1986). Values, Illich (1997) argues, replace our sense of good and bad, we become unable to judge whether things are of adequate size, we lose our sense of proportion, in a cosmic sense – that is our loss in the reign of the Latouchian religion of economy (Latouche, 2006). Ellul

(1968) in the 1950s identified Taylor's "Scientific Management" with *la technique*, Ivan Illich saw the dawn of the age of systems as the ultimate imbalance for manipulative tools – the age of systems, or the performance society is their face in the contemporary times, the fluidity of management, where everything and everyone are seen as resources that must be optimized, productive, useful.

The use of values itself being embedded in the mentality of the system, we may easily fall into the same trap of creating the problems we may be trying to fight. Machado (2018), studying an ecovillage in southern Brazil, points out that the main normative document of the community was in constant change. This document was conceived to regulate ways of participation, conditions for association, financial costs and remuneration for work, and was based in a strict set of permacultural<sup>2</sup> values. However, many of the people involved and the *de facto* way of doing things observed by the author showed a rather different way of doing them, rendering the rules of the document to exist only to be broken. Machado uses the term *inoperancy* to describe that which appears in the threshold, in the being that presents itself as *it is*, without being subject to categorization. Our intuition is that precisely this escape from the institutionalized may be an interesting path. Freitas (2015), on a restaurant in Porto Alegre, Brazil, describes a few practices of the small business. Its refusal of working with credit cards and bank accounts, as well as soda drinks, not establishing a fixed price for the services and refusing to rise the number of the meals served to keep up with the demand illustrate a different relation of the workers with money. Even though the restaurant is thought of as their workers means to make a living, there is the refusal of letting profitability, efficiency and market laws guide their actions.

These alternative organizing practices show, rather than techniques out of the Pandora box, quite simple postures of foolish refusal and openness to what may come about, to the potential of the encounters of people in a given place at a given time, a faith in the singularity of each situation. Maybe it's not by foresight and manipulation of a means of organizing, that is to say, a Promethean organizing, which seeks to use the fire of the gods to face the evils let out of the Pandora Box, to institutionalize substantive values that a convivial degrowth society may be nourished. Rather, it may be along the choice of Prometheus brother, Epimetheus, who against his advice married Pandora, living along with the one thing kept in her box: hope. The willingness to be open towards whatever maybe given by the world, instead of trying to secure that good things will happen by

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2 On permaculture, see Mollison and Holmgren (1982).

institutionalizing values. Going back to trusting our guts and each other. If we're oppressed from the inside, the topology of growth may be imploded from within as well.

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