

Degrowth Theory in Dialogue with Michel Henry's theory of culture

Henry's 'cultural' works – *Barbarism* and *From Communism to Capitalism* among others -- are fundamentally works of deduction and proceed at a fairly abstract, or even *a priori* level. One looking for careful sociological or historical analysis will be left empty handed. Early on in *Barbarism* Henry claims that on the basis of an initial analysis of Galilean science one can deduce certain consequences (B xiv). Something similar can be said about *From Communism to Capitalism*; while there are references to some events, much of the argument in the books proceeds (as Henry indicates) on a different plane. Henry seeks to show the philosophical basis for the inevitable failures of both communism and capitalism. The correlation between Henry's deductions and contemporary social conditions illustrate and provide supports for the analysis but Henry does not claim to describe the twists and turns of social, political and economic history that gets us to those conditions. Instead, his aim is only to show that (a) these conditions are similar to the ones he deduced such that we have good reason for holding (b) that Galilean science is responsible, at least in large part, for these conditions without Henry needing to specify the historical details of *how* this happened. The catastrophes that Henry addresses himself to in these works were not the result of poor political leadership or an election that went the wrong way, but rather the logical consequences -- with the concurrent sense of logical necessity -- of philosophical errors.

While I find much to admire in Henry's approach, I will not be entirely faithful to it; in this paper, I want to drag Henry away from his deductions and put him in conversation with a discipline he has no love for, and is in fact, sharply critical of, i.e., economics. To do this, I will begin with his account of fascism, which I will argue he sees as the logical consequence of modern barbarism. If this is the case, then modern societies have a problem: insofar as we are increasingly barbaric, we are increasingly at risk of relapsing into fascism (if it ever went away). Note well: the risk of fascism is not confinable to certain segments of the population, but part and parcel of the contemporary condition: we shouldn't look for fascists exclusively in the alt-right, but also in the mainstream, in our universities and schools, in our business and banks, even

– to the extent that we formed by a barbaric society – in ourselves. After developing his account of fascism, I will suggest that what economists and social theorists refer to as degrowth theory has a number of resonance with Henry's thought and represents possible inoculation against fascism.

PART ONE: FROM BARBARISM TO FASCISM

In *Barbarism*, Henry's opposes culture and barbarism. Culture denotes the expression of life in praxis, in tasks related to gathering food, creating shelter and so on. Culture is rich with sound and colour. It is the expression of life in its particularity: this food, this field, this village. Barbarism denotes the denial or self-alienation of life in an atmosphere permeated by Galilean abstraction. It is grey and cold, replacing *the food I taste* with an analysis of agricultural production and *this field* with hectares, and so on. Barbarians do not discover truth in the feeling of sun on my skin, but in the mathematical calculation of temperature, the electromagnetic spectrum and so on. Needless to say, Henry seeks to challenge the divorce between sensibility and truth. It is easy to misread Henry's criticisms of modern science and he is often taken as a kind of romantic or Luddite who rejects modern science completely. He is more accurately read as pointing to the limitations of modern Western science; his claim is not that science does not discover truth, but only that it does not get at the only truth or the most important truths. Many of his critics fail to realize that his distinction between two kinds of truth (i.e., the truth of life and the truth of the world) affirms that there is truth in the world.¹ The problem, as he sees it, is that the success of modern science in its domain bedazzles the mind and leads us to believe that *all* truths must fit into the mathematical and desensitized model of modern science. In short, by bedazzling us by its successes, we are distracted from our lives, treating our deepest experiences as mere subjective ephemera vis-à-vis the quantitative data of the scientist. This distraction and distortion, which Henry labels 'barbarism' comes to dominate and define twentieth century European and American society.

¹ For an example of this kind of critic, see Benjamin Noy's review of *Barbarism* in *New Formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* (80-81, 2013, pp. 234-236).

Henry labels as fascist any thing which "pursues the devaluation of the individual in such a way that the individual becomes nothing, or something insignificant or bad and henceforth its suppression seems legitimate." (FCC 45). It might be hard to see how exactly this follows from the Galilean abstraction described just above. But both Henry suggests that it does, and for defensible reasons. The fascism of the barbarian ultimately lays in an ignorance of life, in the belief that what really and truly matters is not the richness of subjective life, but rather the objective formality of the models and formulas one has learned in school. To the extent that modern governments and economies operate in an increasingly 'scientific' fashion (one can think here of Max Weber's analysis of the bureaucratic state in his *Economy and Society*) they are increasingly barbaric. In short, barbarism, understood as the spread of the scientific method beyond its proper domain such that the truth of life is obscured, marginalized or rejected, is predisposed towards fascism insofar as it believes that life is less important than the model. This idea forms a major part of Henry's critique of soviet Marxism.

In *From Communism to Capitalism* Henry seeks, among other things, to separate Marx's ideas from the institutional Marxism of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In fact, he claims that institutional Marxism has fundamentally misunderstood Marx -- they were fascist, Marx himself was not. To do so, he makes two important claims. Firstly, that Marxism is properly understood as a philosophy of life insofar as Marx makes the expression of life via labor the central theme of his analysis and that his project was to liberate life from the alienation imposed upon it by modern industrial methods. Secondly, that communism betrays Marxism by subordinating life to the demands of the state; so while importing much of Marx's economic and political platform it fundamentally reverses the ranking of life vis-a-vis the state. In the Soviet system, life was supposed to serve the state and its economy, rather than vice versa. But, Henry continues, we find the same subordination of life to economy in communism's great rival, capitalism. In both American style capitalism and Russian communism, life is put to the service of the economy. And here, it is important to add, Henry maintains that 'the economy' is a second-order abstraction existing primarily as statistics and indices, in GDP and the Dow Jones (FCC ###). The economy is not real, or not real in the same way that the lives of individuals are real. The labour of individuals is real, but the

economy, as an object of study, exists as data points, charts, graphs; it is an abstraction. Economies, Henry argues, exist because people live and work. So, Henry continues, despite clear differences, communism and capitalism share the same fundamental error: they both suppose that the economy is something real and fundamental, that it exists independently of life, and is, in many respects, more important than life.

In this sense, the political philosophy suggested by Henry seems largely negative (I am assuming, with Aristotle, that economic philosophy is obviously a species of political philosophy): both communism and capitalism are critiqued in the name of life, but it is less clear what an economics hospitable to life would look like. How would we conceptualize an economy that serves life? It would not be a libertarian economics that leaves workers at the mercy of markets and predatory interests, but nor would it be a regulatory economy that noses its way into everything. And, it would have to support, rather than restrain, the expression of life in culture. Towards the end of *From Communism to Capitalism* he mentions the communal decision making of “an Amazonian tribe” as the only acceptable form of democracy (FCC 111). But it is hard to see what precisely to make of this, except an obvious preference for small communities living close to nature. I will return to this point later.

PART TWO: DEGROWING THE ECONOMY

What is the lesson of Henry’s negativity? He reminds us that (a) economics ought to be understood as a means rather than an end because (b) economics, like other human inventions, is an outgrowth of life and subordinate to it and (c) when these point are forgotten, there is an inevitable slide towards fascism regardless of the official ideology of the regime. One might add (d) more generally, that political philosophy should begin with attention to life, its expressions and needs and consistently return to that source, resisting the temptation to trade the inheritance of life for the pottage of both philosophical abstraction and conceptual gymnastics on the one hand, and the slow slouching development towards fascism on the other. Although I don't develop the point in the paper, I take it the listener will be able to think of examples of important and influential political philosophies that begin elsewhere, e.g., with thought

experiments about states of nature, the demands of rationality or whatever, and contrast it with the views of Henry.

I mentioned earlier Henry's suggestion that perhaps the only form of government worth having would be exemplified in the tribal council of an imagined and small Amazonian tribe. He writes:

It is thus important to return to the only acceptable sense of the concept of democracy, that is, to its reference not to the people but to living individuals. The idyllic situation would be an Amazonian tribe holding a general assembly at night in which everyone participates, including women and children, and decides together the date for the next festival, at which the sons and daughters of the neighbouring tribe will be eaten (FCC 111)

The closing reference to cannibalism suggests both that this situation is not as idyllic as we might suspect, and that it is, in its own way, undesirable. Henry acknowledges as much, and goes on to write that as soon as a society grows to a modest size, this sort of direct democracy will falter. Secondary institutions -- delegates, rules of order, offices and officers and so on -- will be necessary to manage the larger population and once the accoutrements of the state are in place, they will grow and life will slowly but surely be restrained. Indeed, Henry believes that the genesis of "politics" is precisely this, the "the substitution of the affairs of life... by general affairs that are public and political" (FCC 111). A politics or economics of life is impossible, but a politics or economics friendly to life, i.e, ones that seeks to curb its own growth can be envisioned. In what follows, I want to explore the possibilities for a politics and economics friendly to life; to do so, I will not attempt to invent one, but rather to explore a theory that already exists: degrowth theory

In what follows, I will focus on the political or ethical components to degrowth theory. It was noted by degrowth theorists that the demand for growth requires an organization of societies that instrumentalizes humans, the land, and resources; placing ever-increasing demands on them to increase output. The focus on growth demands efficiency; and this requires, to put it in Henry's terms, the subordination of life to the demands of the economy. The demand for growth is, they argue, insatiable and

destructive of any culture or practice that is deemed inefficient. (One thinks here of Henry's lamenting description of the placing of power-lines near an ancient monastery in *Barbarism*). The benefits of moving away from growth should be apparent: human beings, the land and its resources would now longer be constantly stressed to produce more and more, cultural and social practices that are inefficient would now longer be threatened. Or, at least, that is the claim made by degrowth theorists.

The difference between capitalism and communism, as the case of China perhaps best shows, only regards the means to achieving growth, not different evaluations of growth. The resonance between Henry's criticisms of capitalism and communism and that of degrowth theorists is, I think, readily discernable. But it is perhaps also trivial: so they both don't like modern economies. What is more interesting, and what I will focus on here, is the extent to which Henry's vision of "culture" (as opposed to barbarism") joins with what degrowth theorists refer to as "decolonizing the imaginary." It is an admittedly ugly phrase, and I feel slightly embarrassed writing it. But so it goes. So what does the phrase mean? Let's begin with the second part: "The imaginary." According to Serge Latouche's explanation "the imaginary" signifies the set of concepts, ideas and feelings by which we construct and navigate our social world. The term 'imaginary' is chosen here to indicate that these things are not, strictly speaking real. It is not clear to me how the line between real and imaginary is being drawn (the ontology is underdeveloped) but it is clear to me that Henry's distinction between the radical reality of life and the being of abstractions or ideals is consistent with the way the term is used by degrowth theorists. The imaginary has, for some time, been 'colonized' by beliefs in the necessity and goodness of growth and development the good life consists in convenience, abundance, things that are shiny and new, and in great quantities.

Henry's description of the conflict between culture and barbarism shows many of the same dynamics as in degrowth theorists' account of the colonization and decolonization of the imaginary. Barbarism, is spread by advertising and international media. In short, what I want to argue is that the colonization of the imaginary describes the same phenomena that Henry has in mind when discussing barbarism. I am not

claiming, at this point, that the terms have the same meaning, but only that they have the same extension. Let us assume going forward that “colonization of the imaginary” has the same extension as “barbarism” and decolonization has the same as “culture.” If so, then Henry's analysis of culture and barbarism can illuminate some of the same phenomena approached under the rubric of colonization and decolonization of the imaginary by degrowth theorists. My hypothesis is that Henry's approach, more philosophical and phenomenological than economic or sociological, shows how *life* is affirmed by degrowth and distorted and turned against itself in growth economies. In short, if I am right, then a synthesis of Henry's practical philosophy and degrowth theory explains why an increase in material comforts and conditions has not led to a mass flourishing of human life and, explains why intentional degrowth may stand a better chance of doing so.

Degrowth theorists are sometimes characterized as anti-utilitarian. This is not meant as an explicit refusal of the ethical theory associated with J.S. Mill and his heirs, but mainly as rejecting the *homo economicus* model of decision making procedures orbiting around efficiency, and instead assert the importance of social bonds, generosity and other less quantifiable considerations (*Degrowth* 1-3). So long as we continue to think in terms of efficiency, they argue, we will remain trapped in the growth mindset. In short, anti-utilitarians argue that sometimes it is better to do things in an inefficient way. For example, a giant marigold farm might be a more efficient way to produce marigolds than a small field on the outskirts of Cholula. But the small field is nonetheless better. Henry would no doubt agree, although he would phrase the matter differently: without denying the importance of social bonds and generosity, Henry would focus on the fact that the small field enables one to live with the marigolds, to relate to them in *praxis*. The communal work in the field supports and creates social bonds by uniting the expression of numerous individual lives in one common project, the cultivation of marigolds. The small field, while inefficient, makes possible the expression of life.

Barbarism suppresses life not merely through its coarseness and vulgarity, of even in the relentless use of abstract models in the sciences (all things Henry notices and critiques), but also, and perhaps most insidiously, in its size. Merging degrowth

theory with Henry, we may say that the barbaric economy of growth subordinates life to efficiency, communities to models, pathos to calculation, creating a kind of stunted and unhappy figure and deploying him merely for the sake of more growth. The conclusion, however unpalatable it may be, is that growth is fascist.²

² I am in the unenviable positions of closing with a point that must be apparent to anyone familiar with the career of F.T. Marinetti. The eleventh point in his 1909 futurist manifesto promises to praise growth, to glorify arsenals and shipyards, electric power, factories and so on; the ninth point promises to glorify war and violence. The two taken together paint a fairly recognizable portrait of fascism; and it is not surprising that Marinetti was closely associated with Italian fascism.