

Excerpt from *In defense of degrowth* by Giorgos Kallis

Chapter 19: A pope for degrowth

In his recent Encyclical on the environment, Pope Francis writes that “[it has become] easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit.” He concludes that “the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth.”

This time the Pope has science on his side. Ecological economists have proven that the miraculous growth of the 20th century would have been impossible without the bonanza of cheap oil. Yet growth has costs. Studies of happiness and genuine progress confirm the Pope’s claim that “the growth of the past two centuries has not always led to an integral development and an improvement in the quality of life.” Since the 1970s, in most advanced countries GDP has grown, but happiness and wellbeing have stagnated together with wages. Growth has become uneconomic, economist Herman Daly argues.

Climate change will be disastrous, scientists warn us, and there is no doubt that it is caused by the carbon our growing economies emit faster and faster. We can fantasize all we want about carbon markets, geo-engineering, or solar panels in Sahara, but up to now the only factor that probably reduces carbon emissions is de-growth.

Degrowth is politically impossible, I am often told. As the Pope puts it, “A politics concerned with immediate results, supported by consumerist sectors of the population, is driven to produce short-term growth.” Yet it is more than that. Lack of growth in economies that are designed to either grow or die can be catastrophic. But it doesn’t have to. There are alternatives for “prosperity without growth”: sharing work, instituting a basic and a maximum income, reallocating public resources and investments, taxing carbon not work, capping carbon emissions, or limiting the creation of money by private banks.

Many non-believers would agree with the Pope that “[i]t is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things” and that “[s]uch sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating.” Creating the conditions in which more and more people can live simple and fulfilled lives requires transformative political change. And an end to the self-destructive pursuit of more and more growth.