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PERSPECTIVE

Serge Latouche: a degrowth anthropologist?

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Abstract
In this interview, conducted at the historic Café Le Metro in Paris, Serge Latouche—a foundational thinker in degrowth—explores the often-overlooked relationship between anthropology and degrowth. The idea of conducting this interview emerges from co-teaching an anthropology course, where we identified a gap in addressing Latouche's anthropological foundations. Although he has frequently highlighted anthropology's role in conceptualizing degrowth, his personal reflections on this connection remain underexamined. Drawing on his intellectual and life experiences, Latouche offers some provocative ideas on this relationship, as well as on the degrowth movement and literature at large. This dialogue responds to a growing academic interest in this intersection, illustrated by recent events such as the *Anthropology and Degrowth* seminar at the London School of Economics (Cabaña et al., 2023a, 2023b) and publications like *Degrowth and Anthropology* in the Oxford Bibliographies in Anthropology (Paulson et al., 2024).

Today, degrowth is emerging as a dynamic and increasingly influential field of transdisciplinary research, weaving together insights from ecological economics, philosophy, political science, environmental sciences, geography, and—though often overlooked—anthropology.

As engaged anthropologists teaching environmental anthropology and local knowledge at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, we were drawn to the ideas of Serge Latouche, the French economist and anthropologist widely credited with the first conceptualization of degrowth. His critiques of economic growth and calls for a radical shift in our social and economic paradigms have made him a central figure in contemporary debates. Yet, as we prepared course materials and revisited his numerous interviews, we noticed a striking gap: despite Latouche's own emphasis on the role of anthropology in his thinking, his reflections on the synergies between anthropology and degrowth have received little attention. More broadly, the literature on this connection remains surprisingly scarce.

Interest in this intersection, however, has taken off considerably in the last two years. This is reflected in the seminar *Anthropology and Degrowth: Deepening the Dialogue*, held at the London School of Economics in July 2023 (Cabaña et al., 2023a), which brought together over 30 participants from diverse origins and academic backgrounds; in the collaborative and disseminative publication that followed, titled *Anthropology and Degrowth: Where to Next?* and published on the *Undisciplined Environments* blog (Cabaña et al., 2023b); and in the comprehensive scholarly review *Degrowth and Anthropology*, published in *Oxford Bibliographies* (Paulson et al., 2024).

As the thinker most responsible for popularizing the term "degrowth" (Kallis, 2018, p. 4), Latouche remains a pivotal figure in these discussions. We felt there was no better way to explore the underexamined relationship between degrowth and anthropology than to go straight to the source. The conversation that follows is our attempt to do just that.

On a July afternoon of 2022, Serge Latouche met us at the Café Le Metro in the Quartier Latin in Paris, the scene of one of the historic moments that marked his intellectual and life trajectory: May '68. The French thinker appeared dressed in a light raincoat, hiking shoes, a briefcase, a walking stick, and a sailor's cap. He guided us to a table at the back and ordered a coffee. He had just had a laryngeal paralysis and was still recovering, so he would only be able to give us an hour of his time. In the end, it would be almost two.[1]

1. Economics and ethnography: "a real schizophrenia"

To begin with, we would like to ask you about your relationship with anthropology: does your life and intellectual trajectory have to do with an ethnographic and anthropological trajectory?

Absolutely. I went into economics because of Marx, because I thought it was necessary to deal with economics and for that you had to study economics. But my personal taste would

[1] This is an edited and condensed version of the interview. The interview guide was meticulously prepared in advance, drawing on extensive readings of the author's work and previous interviews. The conversation was conducted in French and later fully translated and edited by the authors.

have led me much more towards anthropology, sociology, and so on. When I went to Africa in '64, I had the books of Lévi-Strauss, Balandier, and others in my suitcase.[2] I took them with me. But I was a developmentalist, I worked for the Institut National de Droit et d'Administration in Léopoldville. I was a development expert. At the same time, I was interested in syncretic cults: kitawala, kimbanguism, etc. I had been to Nkamba Jerusalem [Democratic Republic of Congo], the holy city of the Kimbanguists, I collected masks, and I was interested in all tribal cultures. In short: on the one hand, I was doing ethnology, practical work, and on the other hand, pure economics. It was a real schizophrenia.

What exactly where you doing in Africa?

In Africa I did my thesis, a heterodox Marxist thesis on global impoverishment. It was a very "Third Worldist" thesis that ended with a plea for technology as a shortcut to development. I defended it in '66, after my second year in Congo, and then went to Laos. That's where I made my way to Damascus, like St. Paul on the way to Damascus. I realized that economics was a religion and that economists, including myself, were missionaries whose aim was to colonize people's imagination about development, economics, and growth. It was the economization of the world. Laos, although very sparsely populated, was a mosaic between the Lao, the Thai, the Meo, the Ha. I went to visit the Meo in the mountains and found that, yes, these people had a happy life after all. They would plant rice for a few days a year, say about fifty days, and then the rest of the time they would wait for it to grow and celebrate by dancing around the pagoda. They would go hunting and fishing. In the local language, the expression that was always used was carefree, in stark contrast to their neighbors in Vietnam or even Thailand, which were then experiencing rapid economic development. The expression always used in Lao was "Bô pe nyang." When faced with suggestions from developmentalists, "You should do this or that in your house...," the response was, "What's the point? - What's the point? - It's useless: bô pe nyang."

[2] The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) was the founder of structural anthropology, which had a significant impact on the social sciences and humanities throughout the second half of the 20th century and has shaped the discipline to this day. Although Latouche did not specify which of his books he read, Tristes Tropiques (Lévi-Strauss, 1955) is undoubtedly the most widely read and influential outside of anthropology. Georges Balandier (1920–2016) was also a renowned French anthropologist who left his mark on political anthropology and, above all, Africanist anthropology. It is therefore not surprising that Latouche would have referenced him during his stays on the African continent.

That's when you had a crisis... a conversion. Your experience seems to demonstrate exactly the epistemological value of ethnography. Ethnographers are precisely people in the field who ask themselves questions and change the way they act and look at the world... Do you see yours as a kind of ethnographic experience? Did you have a notebook, an ethnographic practice...?

No. I realized it later, retrospectively. It just happened. I went back to France in 67-68. I got a job as a "Chargé de cours" in Lille. I started trying to combine my experience of Africa and Laos, my interest in psychoanalysis, anthropology, and sociology with economics. At the beginning of the '68 course, the students of Nanterre required another type of subject. At that time, the students were the ones running the show. They said: "We want a course in economic philosophy." No one had ever given it before. And they asked me, who had just arrived in Lille. And then I started talking about psychoanalysis and economics, anthropology, and economics. So, in the end, this sort of metanoia—as you could call it—lasted about 10 years. I call it "wandering in the desert." The result was my first book, *Epistemology and Economics*, subtitled *Essay on a Freudo-Marxist Social Anthropology.*[3] I realized that this book in itself was a journey. It is incoherent because it is a transition from my initial Marxism, still as an economist, to a rejection of economics. When I became an economics professor, I no longer believed in economics. That is why I was very struck by the fact that somewhere Lévi-Strauss said: "there is only one social science, the science of man, and the social science is anthropology. All the other disciplines are branches within one."[4] But basically, this was already Aristotle's idea: Aristotle's ethics is the science of human behavior. Man's behavior is religious, economic, social, cultural... so there is only one science of man.

[3] Latouche (1973).

[4] This statement is not a direct quotation but rather a free interpretation by Latouche. According to Lévi-Strauss, social anthropology must gather, compare, and generalize the knowledge produced by "particular sciences" (economics, law, political science, among others) alongside the detailed inventory of societies it has constituted (Lévi-Strauss, 1996, pp. 11–44). These particularisms must be analyzed through their symbolic significance as signs, transforming anthropology into a kind of "semiology" ("séméiologie") (Lévi-Strauss, 1996, p. 18). This approach, inspired by linguistic structuralism, is applied to the entirety of the human and social sciences (Lévi-Strauss, 1996, pp. 339–364). This idea of totality also emanates from the historical role of anthropology as a humanism, the third and definitive humanism after the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, now completed by the knowledge of the whole of human cultures (Lévi-Strauss, 1996, pp. 339–364). However, also notable in Lévi-Strauss is the differentiation of the disciplines that study societies (Lévi-Strauss, 1996, pp. 319-322) and of the stages of anthropology themselves (Lévi-Strauss, 1971, pp. 402–443).

2. Anthropology and degrowth: “they do not make sense”

What did you observe that really made you break your schemes in relation to non-Western epistemologies in Africa and Laos? What types of non-capitalist economies do you use to support your ideas?

What struck me most was the African experience of the informal economy because it's not another economy, it's another society where people produce enough to eat and shape their own lives. Over time, by force of circumstance, by de-culturation, they may adopt economic categories themselves, but they are not part of the economic logic at all.[5]

There would be no economy without objectification, reification, and exploitation of nature. What is your opinion of the critique of the nature-culture dichotomy emanating from anthropology, from the so-called "ontological turn" led by Philippe Descola?[6]

Obviously, the growth society is based on an anthropocentric paradigm. It is obvious that the degrowth society cannot assume this idea of man as master and ruler of nature. So, should we adopt a geocentric or ecocentric vision? For me, degrowth obviously must break with the patriarchal paradigm, with the anthropocentric paradigm, and therefore has to be much more ecocentric. Man is part of nature. Animals are much less stupid than we think.

[5] The author did not elaborate on this point in the interview, but on this topic, one can consult his work, particularly his 1988 book L’autre Afrique: Entre don et marché (Latouche, 1988); and, in a more synthesized and philosophical manner, his chapter on African wisdom in the 2016 book Les précurseurs de la décroissance: Une anthologie (Latouche, 2016, pp. 44-47).

[6] Although the scholars associated with the “ontological turn” (Philippe Descola, but also Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, and others) do not claim this label and, therefore, it does not constitute a unified movement, it is understood as an orientation in anthropology (as were the linguistic turn and the postmodern turn) toward overcoming the nature/culture dichotomy. This approach focuses on the fundamental principles underlying ways of conceiving a world and its existents, relational modes, and the importance of ethnographic data as a form of inductive knowledge. While the term specifically refers to the use of ontologies in Philippe Descola's (2005) work and there is a certain legacy of structuralism and French anthropology, the ontological turn is considered a true international intellectual movement with extensive literature on its very definition. See, for example: Kelly (2014), Keck et al., (2015), Viveiros de Castro (2015), Tola (2016), and Holbraad and Pedersen (2017).

You sometimes speak of Amerindian wisdom as a precursor of degrowth. Where do these sources that you use as examples come from? Is there any ethnographic interest in these proposals, in these types of knowledge?

Yes, of course! ... Well, I had an ethnographic experience, if you will, when I had the opportunity to go to New Guinea and attend traditional ceremonies and so on. The masks, the canoe... And I realized that I was not cut out to be a field ethnologist, ethnographer, because I was actually bored! In other words, there I was with a character who is a half-Westernized Papuan, a government minister but who has returned to his family, to his tribe, to participate in traditional ceremonies. These ceremonies take place over a very long period of time, several days, and for hours and hours nothing happens. It's like when I participated in palavers in Africa. For a typical westerner like me, studying this seems very interesting, but living it seems unbearable! It's so boring, it takes so much time! And yes, you have to give it time, it happens in another time frame, but it's not mine. You have to have a vocation... I'm more like Mauss, an office anthropologist!

Speaking of Mauss… what impact have classical anthropologists like Karl Polanyi, Marcel Mauss, or Marshall Sahlins had on you?

Well, they are fundamental! Of course, at MAUSS[7] we are collectively inspired first and foremost by Mauss, who remains our "totem." Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* is the Bible.[8] Polanyi is very good, except for his history of formal economics, which was demolished by Louis Dumont.[9] I have read with specific interest Marshall Sahlins. For me, *Stone Age Economics* is a fundamental book.[10] I always quote him. He also criticizes Polanyi in this regard. Polanyi is great, but he's trapped by his idea. There is a debate that will never be resolved between nominalists and realists. It goes back to the Middle Ages, the dispute about universals. I

[7] Revue du MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales) / MAUSS Journal (Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences).

[8] Mauss (1990).

[9] Dumont (1944/1983).

[10] Sahlins (1972).

defend a nominalist position, and that's why I think there is no essence of economics.[11] There is an aspiration shared by all human beings to a certain form of dignity, yes! But that being so, it is an empty concept: it takes very diverse concrete forms in different societies.

Do you think it is possible to do "degrowth anthropology"?

Degrowth anthropology doesn't make much sense. I think we're just doing anthropology. And it happens to correspond quite well with the philosophy of degrowth. You don't have to use the label degrowth for everything. I've run into the same problem with a book whose preface I'm writing at the moment. They wanted me to write a book on degrowth pedagogy. I told them no. A pedagogue does not "do" degrowth; a pedagogue leads children into adulthood so that those adults find their voices and paths in the world. A pedagogue gives them the tools to become adults. It is not a matter of opposing a format for a consumer society to a format for a degrowth society. We give them the tools they need to criticize the society in which they live, and they have to find what could be called a "path of truth," without knowing beforehand what it is. Otherwise, it would be terrorism!

3. Past and future in degrowth: "inventing the future by rediscovering the roots of the past"

On degrowth in relation to the past and tradition, do you think we are afraid to talk about it because of being criticized for wanting to go back to the "cave age" or be like the Amish?

The Amish are cool, they're interesting! They obviously have a sectarian side that you don't have to subscribe to, but they are interesting because they are proof that you can reject certain technologies and at the same time manage very well in life. It's an economic success story that has survived two or three centuries.... I think we can only build the future on the basis of the past. And so, to build the future, the critique of the present must use the resources of the past. Not to go back to a past that we will never find again, but to build a

[11] On this topic, see de Libera (1966).

future, using foundations, values, energies, things... of the past. When Macron labels the degrowthers as Amish, he misses the mark.[12]

Do you also see risks in that?

Of course I do! For example, in Spain there is a kind of return, even on the left, to the traditional family... sometimes a bit fascist too. In France, we also have a small problem that has to do with the trap of words. For example, if we use the word "re-localization," we talk about rediscovering the sense of the local, but we are quick to avoid using the word "localism." And this is so because, in France, localism is used by the National Front as a way of locking us into the local. So, it is a matter of building a multidimensional, welcoming, and open identity on the basis of non-essentialist roots. Roots can be invented, roots can be created… It is important to have roots! I am from Brittany.

What exactly are the spatial limits of these roots? Because there are still states, sovereignty, borders... So, what is the collective subject we have to relate to?

There is no single solution. It is a huge challenge. What is certain is that from the moment we adopt a more ecocentric approach—we must always remain relative in this area—our relationship with the land, the territory, the landscape changes. To put down roots is, in short, to choose one's homeland. One is born French, but one does not have to be only French and always only French. There is a link with the land and a link that my descendants will be forced by necessity to rediscover much more strongly than I will. When globalization breaks down completely, we will be forced to re-establish a much stronger link with the land, simply to survive. From this point of view, it is very interesting to look at some of the experiences lived by the former Soviet Union’s peoples. Let’s think about the whale hunters of Eastern Siberia: completely isolated after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, they have rediscovered shamanism, they have rediscovered different things, because that is what allows them to

[12] The day after the left-wing elected officials' request for a moratorium on the deployment of 5G, French President Emmanuel Macron stated: "I hear many voices rising to tell us that we should address the complexity of contemporary issues by going back to the oil lamp! I do not believe that the Amish model can solve the challenges of contemporary ecology" (AFP, 2020).

survive! They are going to invent their future by rediscovering the roots of the past. But it will never be the past.

How do you see the future of degrowth? Can it be internationalized?

No, because I have always been against internationalization in this form, from the logic of pluriversalism. I say that there are homeomorphic equivalents. In Anglo-Saxon countries, for example, they talked about downscaling and things like that. Voluntary simplicity was a very important movement in Australia. So, my Australian colleagues are doing exactly the same thing about degrowth, but through their own eyes. When I met with one of the indigenous movements' leaders in Ecuador, Luis Macas, from CONAIE, he told me: "What you call degrowth is exactly our conception of *Buen vivir.*" We immediately hit it off, we recognized each other as brothers. So, I think that's great. But I would not call for an "international degrowth."

I think that's a good way to end... But are you more of a pessimistic or an optimistic?

I always use Gramsci's formula in my talks. Do you know it? I temper the pessimism of reason with the optimism of will.[13] There are many reasons to be pessimistic when you look at the state of the world. But there are also reasons for hope. A friend of mine, an Italian journalist, entitled an interview article: "Latouche, un pagano que ha la fede"—a pagan with faith. I have faith, but I am a pagan. And here, unfortunately, Ellul's formula in French is untranslatable, he said: "lorsqu'il n'y a plus d'espoir il ne reste que l'espérance" ("when there is no more hope, only hope remains"). In English there is only one word, hope, but in French there is a nuance between *espoir* and *espérance*. *Espoir* refers to transcendence and faith. Indeed, there is no *espoir* left, but there is still *espérance*. And *espérance* is actually my granddaughter, it is you.

[13] Gramsci (1920) first used this phrase, originally coined by Romain Rolland, in his article "Address to the Anarchists." While this expression is more commonly found in his early writings before imprisonment, it also appears in both his prison letters and Prison Notebooks (Antonini, 2019).

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