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Less is more: The concept of degrowth

Interview: Medina Imsirovic

It is becoming abundantly obvious that we simply must urgently integrate sustainable and ethical practices into all aspects of our lives. The fashion industry, however, with its reliance on traditional business models, continues to drive endless growth and excessive consumerism and has now reached a critical crossroads. The concept of degrowth is fast emerging as a seemingly radical turn away from outdated norms and offers the vision of a business model that prioritizes the common good, an appreciation of resources, and the inclusion of old and new stakeholders – including the environment.

The fashion industry faces the paradox of rising emissions despite serious professions that it is reducing environmental impacts. The United Nations Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action, which was launched in 2018, has over the last three years already lost 31 of its members as they failed to document their progress. Of the remaining 99 signatories, only 45 have set verifiable and adequate goals to contribute to reaching the 1.5°C benchmark. The contradiction between corporate claims and the reality on the ground underscores the need for alternative approaches, such as degrowth, in order to press the pedal on the transformation of the fashion industry, which is so urgently needed.

We interviewed Maximilian Mauracher, who, as co-founder of NEW STANDARD.S, the Berlin-based agency for sustainability strategy and communication, has immersed himself in the world of degrowth. He shares his insights into the challenges that a switchover to sustainable practices spells for the fashion industry – and the opportunities it offers.

Maximilian, what is the current status quo in the fashion industry?

The fashion industry is inherently unsustainable because that's the only way it can function. That system, underpinned by social exploitation, toxic materials, and a waste of resources is deeply embedded in today's hyper-globalized economy.

How can the system be rethought and changed?

One key idea that catches the eye in this context and provides a launchpad for alternatives is that of degrowth. It is a thought experiment that forces us to view the industry from the perspective of actual needs and not from the demand artificially generated by advertising.

How could such a rethink influence production patterns and consumer behavior?

How much clothing would we still buy and need if we were not continuously reminded of it and called upon to do so wherever we look? Undoubtedly less, and that then impacts processes

and structures. We need local supply chains, on-demand production, less mass and more quality instead. Fast fashion is not the future, that's for sure.

Why is it currently so difficult to slow down economic growth?

What we are sadly witnessing everywhere, and not just in the fashion industry, is that voluntary commitments are often insufficient and rarely lead to substantive, long-term changes. All too often, the economic return takes priority over all ethics.

What are the challenges facing ethically responsible companies in the current economic system?

The lack of uniform standards and regulations in the industry places disproportionate pressure on companies that have decided to act in a socially and ecologically responsible manner. While some companies are practicing 'business as usual' and transferring all their externalities onto society or the planet, corporations that act ethically face higher prices and more complex internal workflow. Unfortunately, consumer choices are often based on price.

The concept of degrowth refers to a circumspect movement that questions the constant striving for infinite growth and reassesses the idea. The thinking behind this is that incessant growth is neither inevitable nor sustainable. Instead, the movement argues that taking a step back, slowing things down, or even stabilizing various sectors of the economy is not only possible but essential in order to lay the foundation stone for a more just and ecologically sustainable society. In an age in which wasting resources and placing a burden on the environment have become the norm, degrowth offers a well-considered response and an alternative that champions a world in which quality and sustainability prevail over sheer quantity and indiscriminate growth.

Meaning the politicians must act.

Yes, if there is to be a fundamental transformation, then it is imperative that binding industrial standards be introduced that apply without exception to all companies. Only if conditions are the same everywhere can there be a level playing field, and that is the key to upending the currently destructive systems in which we live and go about our business, and thus the only way to promote long-term, sustainable change.

How can regulatory interventions make a difference?

Political guidelines and regulations are essential in order to create an economic system in which each and every corporation operates according to the same underlying principles, meaning in which there is a level playing field. Special attention must be paid here to small companies that experiment with innovative business models and have dedicated themselves to fair and sustainable business practices or have adopted the concepts of degrowth and the circular economy. It is critical that these companies receive support so that their proposed solutions find general recognition and can be realized on a larger scale.

And what shape should such political framework conditions take?

It is crucial that a regulatory framework be created in which dishonest, ecologically and socially damaging practices by large corporations are contained, and they are forced to take responsibility for their actions. At the political level, this requires clear stipulations and financial instruments. As long as the right values in business operations do not receive due recognition and their due reward and there is no level playing field, entrepreneurs who are ethically correct in their actions will find it difficult to survive within the given system.

What actual measures can companies take in order to successfully integrate degrowth principles into their operations?

Degrowth primarily concentrates on no longer treating endless economic growth as the main indicator for economic life, but instead takes other KPIs (in particular the common good) as the benchmark. The idea is to pursue economic activities such that all the parties involved, and that includes the environment, benefit from them. In some cases this can mean that a company needs to be smaller, especially in a sector such as fashion, where the impacts on society and the environment are often more damaging than they are favorable. However, are such smaller corporations necessarily a bad thing?

No, that is not a bad thing. After all, degrowth itself offers great potential, does it not?

It does indeed. Greater care for resources and thus their reduced use could smooth the path to new, profitable services such as repair shops or sharing and/or re-use models and create new jobs. I am excited to see when the first fashion labels in the Global North start organizing their supply chains on a cooperative basis as commons. For example, when seamstresses are given a direct stake in the company this leads to fundamentally different and presumably more sustainable decisions. This could spark swifter change in the industry in the direction of more consistent sustainability. Degrowth can thus have an incredibly beneficial impact, particularly in the social and societal context. And it's high time it did!



Maximilian Mauracher is a designer, strategist, and co-founder of NEW STANDARD.S, the Berlin-based agency for sustainability strategies and communication.

And how can we structure efficient and caring resource management that focuses not only on current needs but also secures a sustainable future for coming generations?

The fashion industry is so strongly geared to excess production and excessive consumerism that it is obvious we need to restrict it somehow. However, the planetary limits often seem abstract, in particular when applied to individual companies. The best way to show and set such limits is by adopting as our inner compass a strong sense of caring for the planet, but to achieve that we need more stakeholders at the table. An innovative approach could consist of metaphorically including nature or representatives of future generations in the discussion. This could generate empathy and a diversity of perspectives in our everyday business lives.

How can we envision a future for the fashion industry that avoids wasting resources?

The future shape of the fashion industry in a post-growth world will doubtless differ considerably from its current form. The intransigent desire for constant growth forces the industry at present to waste resources with every new season and to exploit human labor. What is irrefutably the case is that humankind will continue to live happily without the current structures of the fashion industry; indeed, we would potentially lead more satisfied and fulfilled lives.

Thank you for your time, Maximilian!