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Essay

## The World is Yours: “Degrowth”, Racial Inequality and Sustainability

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**Abstract:** In French economist Serge Latouche’s 2009 book, *Farewell to Growth*, Latouche discusses “degrowth” in great detail, but he also explains how racial bias (and bias in general) in the world today has no place in a post-GDP world that embraces the principles outlined in “degrowth” or, as he calls it, *décroissance*. Latouche writes in *Farewell to Growth* that “we resist, and must resist all forms of racism and discrimination (skin color, sex, religion, ethnicity)”, biases he insist are “all too common in the West today.” Latouche’s ideas are important for considering “degrowth”, because racial bias and the historical problems presented by that bias, in the United States, continues despite efforts to address it in a significant manner. *The World is Yours* discusses “degrowth”, economic growth and racial inequality, seeking to not only provide a better understanding of the recent social, legal and political meaning of these terms, but also the difficulties presented by these ideas today in a world increasingly committed to economic growth, even at the expense of human existence. How can a new economic paradigm be pursued that is more sustainable? Will African-Americans and other groups of color and nations of color accept “degrowth” if the US begins to implement a real sustainable agenda that addresses racial inequality?

**Keywords:** degrowth, racial inequality, wealth gap, sustainability, restorative justice

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### 1. Introduction: Postscript: Notes from Degrowth, Montreal, May 2012

It was in April 1955, in Bandung, Indonesia, that 29 countries from Africa and Asia gathered for a conference on their status and future in a post-colonial world [1]. The American writer, Richard Wright, attended the conference and documented the proceedings in his now famous travel account,

*The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference.* Wright's account offers a political, racial and religious contextualization of the events. However, most importantly, the conference, according to Wright, represented a paradigm shift, a moment when the world was posed for a different conversation. Wright examined the conference politically, racially and religiously, seeking to place the conference's events into context [2]. However, most importantly, the conference, according to Wright, represented a different time, a moment when the world was positioned differently in various ways. As Wright notes at the beginning of "The Color Curtain":

Almost all of the nations mentioned have been, in some form or another, under the domination of Western Europe; some had been subjected for decades and others had been ruled for three hundred and fifty years [2].

The conference's historical impact is still debated. However, it is remarkable that many of the participants were not in 1955, but are now major economic players in the world and, for the most part, have accomplished these goals through embracing free market principles. This is especially true of many of the Asian nations at the conference that included China, Japan, Korea and Indonesia, the site of the conference (the conference was held there). It is also now becoming true of nations in Africa, who are, as well, becoming more engaged in the world's economy on a planet increasingly globalized and interconnected [3]. These countries have fully embraced development and economic growth and are now slowly raising the quality of life, at least among some degree of their populations, who only a few decades ago looked hopelessly lost in a state of perpetual underdevelopment.

The choice by these once marginalized or colonized nations to participate in the market-driven global economy would not be without costs. As these nations continue to expand economically and grow, the consequences of their participation could not be more compelling for the state of the world. Even while these nations in Asia and Africa languished in poverty and underdevelopment, the pressure on the world's ecological systems was well known. Climate change, global warming, overpopulation and ecological destruction are all possible by-products of the choice by these nations to expand economically and to engage in development associated with Western nations historically [4].

At the time of the Bandung conference, the United States was also undergoing important change. Black Americans long isolated into second-class citizenship in the states, and into a virtual domestic colony, had begun the difficult process of demanding equal citizenship under the law. Rosa Parks, an NAACP trained activist living in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to obey the laws that sanctioned white privilege in 1955 and set in motion a dramatic decade of major social change in the United States that would culminate with new legislation guaranteeing the legal rights of all citizens in voting, public accommodations, employment and education, just to name a few [5].

In May 2012, when I traveled to Montreal, Canada, in the province of Quebec, to present at the "International Degrowth in the Americas" conference, I thought a great deal about connections between the defining aspects of the Bandung conference and the American civil rights movement. I even packed a copy of Richard Wright's now famous book in my briefcase in case I had an opportunity to make reference to it in my presentation.

The Montreal "Degrowth in the Americas" conference presented a forum to deliberate the connection between economic growth and sustainability. This conundrum was (and is) relevant to all nations of the world, but especially to developing nations.

Sustainability has been described as “the overarching issue of our time” [6]. Indeed, sustainability “encompasses assuring the continued capacity of the earth, the economy, and society to provide for our material and human needs and those of future generations” [6]. “Degrowth,” the conference, as I shall now call it, brought scholars from throughout the world together to consider the sustainability of human beings on earth in the wake of the current manner in which humans live their lives and seek sustenance and comfort. These discussions are the culmination of the work of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen [7]. Georgescu-Roegen, a Romanian mathematician and statistician, developed bioeconomics and how this concept was a better guide for the state of the world’s sustainability for living species.

But “degrowth” is more than a series of conferences. It is a movement that has come together based, at least partly, on the relationship between the industrial, highly developed countries of the West (European nations) and the emerging economic nations, such as China, Korea and Brazil. In addition, developing nations in Asia, Africa and South America, barring some cataclysmic event, will become economic players of some note in the world’s affairs. These nations now share the ecological responsibility with all of the world’s citizens in light of their emerging status.

To further emphasize the fact that new players are in the game, in August 2012, Foreign Policy magazine devoted the issue to “Cities”, focusing upon which cities around the globe will be key players in the world’s near future. It is not surprising that most of the cities listed are cities in China. In fact, thirteen of the top 20 dynamic cities for the future are located in China [8]. Again, many once rising economic powers and developing nations were in attendance at the Bandung conference.

The presence of many scholars from these developing nations at the “degrowth” conference in Montreal is evidence of the concern there is throughout the world for sustainability. The fact that the number of scholars from the US was low for the conference is quite troubling considering the issues at stake. I do expect this to change; “degrowth,” or at least the concepts that encompass the ideal, are too familiar and too important for the US to ignore.

According to those who subscribe to the basic idea of “degrowth” or some other version of the same concepts, the movement insists upon a change in economic approach throughout the world in order to reverse the world’s path towards ecological destruction and a future with diminished sustainable systems [9]. Economic growth and the pursuit of it is no longer the guiding principle, but movement towards contraction of growth is the overarching theme. Instead of nations seeking to expand and grow economically, as has been the case for centuries, “degrowth” seeks all nations and all people to alter their lifestyles in the interest of survival based on Georgescu’s bioeconomics theories [10].

However, herein lies the paradox for all of the world’s nations and people, and especially so the nations of color, many of whom gathered more than a half century ago in Bandung as colonialism came to an end in their nations. How can the historically developed nations of high economic development now convince these developing nations that they should halt or significantly alter their economic development and growth and not seek to change the standard of living in their countries for the masses of people for the sake of sustaining a the world population that has heretofore denied them participation? It is perhaps an impossible suggestion. In Montreal, at the conference, this assertion was met with some skepticism.

Lily Raphael, an International Development graduate from McGill University in Montreal, who attended the conference, expressed in an e-mail following the conference the core of this paradox:

I think a lot of it revolves around class. During the week-long conference in Montreal, a recurring thought kept popping in to my head that most experts who put forth ideas and implementations of degrowth are doing so from an already well-off upbringing. Marginalized and socially repressed groups, such as African Americans, have historically been too busy trying to survive or simply get by in the capitalist society that surrounds them. There have not been many alternatives to climbing the socioeconomic ladder that have been offered to them, and certainly not from within the African American community. So I think they are in many ways inherently excluded if they are not in a prestigious higher education institution where discussions of degrowth have mostly taken place. And for those who have managed to get out of poverty, I think their reluctance to follow a movement such as degrowth can be explained in exactly the way you described it in your presentation: “Finally I’ve gotten to a point where I am financially secure by playing the game that has been set in front of me, and now you (the mostly white Degrowth movement in North America) are telling me that I shouldn’t want these things [11]?”

Like Lily Raphael, I am a black American. I reside in the United States, a nation at the center of this debate over economic choices and ecological destruction. It is critical that the US become engaged on the issue of growth and ecological destruction. Despite the fact that other nations have taken the lead on the concept of “degrowth” if progress is to be made on how ecological destruction and growth, the US will have to play a major role. Surely, other nations have come to create their own path to economic success; however, the US, as a result of the enormous wealth the nation accumulated in the 20th century, is still the major player in the world of global economics. It is also a nation that has the power and influence to alter the direction of the world’s ecological path and to forge a new path. It has yet to find the collective will to do so.

Black Americans are intimately intertwined with this reality. We are of African descent, but Americans, and citizens of the United States. Black America (at least a large portion of those individuals who are black Americans) also continue to exist in the United States on an unequal basis in many respects, but especially so on an economic level [12]. It is for these reasons that questions of equality and sustainability are appropriate to be examined from the perspective of black Americans and Black America, while considering the plight of developing nations. This quite unique status, unequal, yet in the US, provides some distance, as well as a necessary intimacy for analysis. This issue could be examined from the perspective of many other racial and/or ethnic groups in the US, especially Native-Americans; however, the African-American experience is singularly unique for examining the question, due to shared history, heritage and the legacy of racism in the US.

## 2. Results

Based upon the discussion contained herein, it will be quite difficult to address inequality and to address the ecological challenges currently in the world. Specifically, black Americans will likely find the prospect of less economic growth troubling without some assurance that economic inequality will be addressed as well. The history of economic inequality in the US and the nation’s failure for centuries to address the issue makes it a fundamentally contentious one, even in an era of significant racial progress.

### 3. Serge Latouche, Racism and Economic Growth

In Serge Latouche's 2009 book, *Farewell to Growth*, he specifically mentions the injustice of racial bias (and bias in general) in the world today. It is important, because it is discussed within the context of economic growth. Latouche writes that "we resist, and must resist all forms of racism and discrimination (skin color, sex, religion, ethnicity)," biases he insists are "all too common in the West today" [13]. Latouche's ideas are important for considering "degrowth", because racial bias and the historical problems presented by that bias, in the United States, continue despite efforts to address it in a significant manner.

"Decroissance" or "Degrowth" [14], the "political slogan" or "banner" that seeks to challenge "growth" or "development" [13] (at least, the continued path of development), would need a platform of strong resistance to racial bias and a path to more racial equality with respect to black Americans due to the enduring racial bias in the US if it is to become embraced. "Degrowth," in whole or in part, depending upon how it is presented, would be attractive to black Americans and nations of color conceptually if racial inequality and bias is also addressed within the context of the implementation of "degrowth".

While the alternative to ignoring this new economic paradigm that addresses serious sustainable concerns is to continue on the same path of economic growth as a human goal and as the measurement of success, historical realities on race are difficult to dismiss. Race bias and racial inequality perpetuated across the centuries is a long standing problem. Is there a reason to embrace "degrowth" or many of its ideals outside of the motivation of addressing inequality? Yes. Black Americans, despite a historically challenged sociopolitical status and complex economic position in the world, are part of the world and, like all other citizens of the world, are concerned with the future direction of the planet and its sustaining systems. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps the most important black American in history, often spoke and wrote about the interconnected nature of the world, as he did in his "Christmas Sermon Peace" of 1967, where he declared that the human race was "bewildered." But, more importantly, Dr. King spoke about how "all life is interrelated", beings who comprise an "inescapable network of mutuality" [15] He adds:

Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality. Did you ever stop to think that you can't leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most of the world [15]?

The ecological reality that could comprise the future makes Dr. King's interrelatedness quite important in regards to future decisions by all individuals and nations. There are numerous opinions on this future that are worthy of recognition and attention in terms of considering the possibilities of a contracting growth society.

One of the leading voices addressing ecological concerns, the scientist, James Hansen, presents a world with a stark future in his book, *Storms of My Grandchildren* when he writes:

Planet Earth, creation, the world in which civilization developed, the world with climate patterns that we know and stable shorelines, is in imminent peril. The urgency of the situation only crystallized in the last few years. We now have clear evidence of the crisis, provided by increasingly detailed information about how the earth responded to perturbing

forces during its history (very sensitively with some lag caused by the inertia of massive oceans) and by observations of changes that are beginning to happen around the globe in response to ongoing climate change [16].

Valerie Fournier uses the “climate change” argument as well, like Hansen, to argue for “alternative economic models” in a 2008 article, “Escaping from the economy: the politics of degrowth.” The dire circumstances, according to Fournier, are “accepted” and have circulated throughout various movements around “green politics” and “development” [17]. Likewise, Peter Victor in his article, “Questioning economic growth,” in the publication, *Nature*, in 2010 also cites “climate change” as the problem in need of a more drastic solution, something he specifically describes as reducing “greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent” over the next 50 years. Victor doubts this cannot be achieved by seeking more economic growth [18]. His analysis links growth again to increased ecological chaos:

As long as economic growth remains as important to global policymakers, humanity is hopelessly constrained: the environmental policies we need face the unreasonable political hurdle that they must be shown to produce economic growth. This must change [18].

But these conclusions by very astute observers of ecological problems linked to human activity and economic growth aren’t likely to convince black Americans and many other nations and communities of color to accept “degrowth” alone without also answering how historical economic inequality, racial bias and the existing vestiges of colonialism are to be addressed as the world transitions to a new world of “degrowth”.

Black Americans, in particular, might accept this call for “degrowth”, or something similar that seeks to address ecological issues, with some degree of skepticism due to a history that seems to assign huge ecological questions in the US as the exclusive dominion of European-Americans [19].

As an example, Kimberly N. Ruffin, a professor of English at Roosevelt University, asserts that movements that attempt to address environmental concerns—“human access” to “non-human nature”—historically have a tendency to be “the domain of middle and upper class European-Americans” while, on the other hand, “environmental justice” (the movement and the issue) is populated by black Americans, Native-Americans, working class European Americans and Latinos. This suggested racial/ethnic “bifurcation” does not represent “the broad based constituencies needed to match the urgent ecological issues facing the nation and the world” [19], according to Ruffin, if one considers this opinion in the context of “degrowth”. The universal importance of the link to ecology, she adds, of all human beings is, therefore, unmistakable:

Clearly, if ecology teaches us anything, it is that our lives are interrelated. Our present ecological condition is best appreciated as transnational and multicultural; understanding the role African-Americans played in one region of the ecological past underscores that African-Americans must be part of the planet’s ecological present and future [19].

Serge Latouche, to his credit, does not offer a compartmentalized analysis of our shared predicament. The commitment to a “growth society” or a “society swallowed up by an economy whose only goal is growth for the sake of growth” is something that affects everyone. [13] Latouche’s view is not couched in polite language either:

Where are we going? We are headed for a crash. We are in a performance car that has no driver, no reverse gear and no brakes and it is going to slam into the limitations of the planet [13].

Latouche is describing a continuum. It is this model that currently dominates the world (the Western world) where “part of humanity” (a small part) lives in “comfort” and the rest of mankind (humanity) does not experience these comforts to any extent [13]. This model also has been responsible for the economic rise of some nations through “aid”, but has largely failed other “underdeveloped” nations with similar efforts to provide aid to these nations [13]. In other words, it is the economic growth model that has promoted inequality. Black Americans easily relate to this unequal economic model, because it is a critical part of their history.

Most black Americans are descendants of Africans brought to the US as “chattel” to work as free laborers in the country’s crude plantation system [20]. They were (and are, if one considers the enduring benefits of that system) part of that unequal economic system. Inequality, as it is directly intertwined with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (The Triangular Trade), is (and was) not just a by-product of chattel slavery, but also the intent of the system that the slavery supported. The system of free labor allowed some to obtain and possess more resources, raw materials and wealth. [21] In the United States, this race based “free labor” chattel property system of work and exploitation existed well before the founding of the Republic in the colonies [22].

The fact that slavery in the New World first began with the enslavement of “the Indian” and then “poor whites” demonstrates that the objective initially for those in senior roles in the system was not necessarily to enslave Africans, but economic maximization. It became economically lucrative to enslave Africans exclusively, due to the “cheapness of the labor” [21]. Of the forced enslavement of Africans and the monetary benefit of it, Eric Williams further writes:

This was not a theory; it was a practical conclusion deduced from the personal experience of the planter. He would have gone to the moon, if necessary, for labor. Africa was nearer than the moon, nearer too than the more populous countries of India and China. But their turn was to come [21].

Surely there were other systems of economic inequality and resource control prior to the rise of chattel slavery in the US and well before the creation of the US; however, the system that most impacted the lives of black Americans is “slavery”. Slavery is the event that set into motion the racial inequality that continues in the United States today. It is an institution that, by design, promotes (and promoted) inequality, and in the case of Africans (black Americans), that inequality has become an enduring part of the historical landscape.

Black Americans (Africans) actually unintentionally perpetuated the system of inequality as a result of their ability to produce benefits for the large population in their status as free labor [23]. The benefits they bestowed upon the majority white population is not just the “agricultural commodity”, but their service in “manufacturing” and in “government” related services [23].

In addition, black Americans “cleared land and built infrastructure—roads, dams, levees, canals, railroads, and bridges”. There isn’t a chance that the United States expanded “westward” without this free labor, and it is not likely the US would become a “continental nation” [23]. The dynamic of inequality, while overt and obvious, is also subtle and, much of the time, hardly considered by most



Americans who take their world status for granted as a result of a substandard teaching of history within society:

Goods and services that were produced by slaves benefited most whites indirectly and passively. It happened through the process of human capital formation. Slaves made it possible for many whites to go into more rewarding occupations, to gain increased skills, and to generate greater lifetime earnings for themselves and their descendants. In these indirect and passive ways, slavery produced enormous benefits beyond those usually considered [23].

This much deeper analysis presents historical inequality along racial lines in much more stark terms. The system is better deemed the “coerced and manipulated diversion of income and wealth from blacks to whites” [31] rather than some random system of socioeconomic exploitation. In regards to “degrowth”, such a system asks: can the US and its citizens become a credible participant towards a sustainable future without first addressing this historical inequality?

In addition, this question extends to much of the developing world as well. Countries all across the planet that have suffered from and still suffer from difficult economic realities are now being asked to not grow, to stop developing in the midst of development. In Latouche’s well-known November 2004 article, he calls for less growth and development and also the abstract model for achieving the goal:

If the South is to attempt to create non-growth societies, it must rethink and re-localize. Southern countries need to escape from their economic and cultural dependence on the North and rediscover their own histories—interrupted by colonialism, development and globalization—to establish distinct indigenous cultural identities. The cultural histories of many societies reveal inherently anti-economistic values. These need to be revived, along with rejected or forgotten products and traditional crafts and skills. Insisting on growth in the South, as though it were the only way out of the misery that growth created, can only lead to further westernization. [24]

Latouche’s opinion is worthy in this instance; however, nations in the developing world likely aspire to some aspects of the West in order to improve the lives of citizens in their countries. Black Americans, in particular, have existed in the United States and might be found to be quite reluctant in rejecting the benefits of Western life. This in no way would dismiss the other part of this problem: the inequality that exists.

#### **4. Racial Inequality and “Degrowth”**

What does racial inequality look like in the United States for black Americans today since the end of slavery in the 19th century? This is something discussed daily, reported regularly, but rarely framed in historical terms. Years ago, in his book, *The Hidden Cost of Being African-American*, sociologist, and writer, Thomas Shapiro, wrote the following:

The enigma of racial inequality is still a festering public and private conversation in American society. After the country’s dismantling of the most oppressive racist policies of its past, many have come to believe that the United States has moved beyond race

and that our most pressing racial concerns should center now on race neutrality and color blindness [25].

Shapiro's statement provides a preface for the overall discussion in the book, which details extensive economic inequality in the US based upon race and wealth that has been decades, perhaps centuries, in the making. [25] In his more recent project, The Institute on Assets and Social Policy, Shapiro, along with Tatjana Meschede and Laura Sullivan, provide a detailed report on race and wealth and inequality in the US in more recent times. [26] The report entitled, "The Racial Gap Increases Fourfold," is essentially an update of the work of Thomas Shapiro and Melvin Oliver, another sociologist, in their 1995 book *Black Wealth/White Wealth*. Shapiro and Oliver, in detail, discuss how lack of wealth and wealth disparities are the major reason for economic inequality in the US between whites and blacks today, despite all efforts to address the legal status of black Americans in today's society [27].

The evidence, gathered from data in the years 1984–2007, determines that the wealth gap between blacks and whites quadrupled during that period. While the wealth gap in 1984 was approximately \$20,000, it is now estimated that the wealth gap between whites and blacks in the US is \$95,000. [26] The wealth gap, to a major degree, is also directly linked to state action regarding the housing market [26].

Due to the federal government's promotion of discriminatory lending practices in the housing market, black Americans were denied the benefit of home ownership, while whites were able to use home ownership to provide economic assets to their families [26]. This is important, because in the United States, the major path to wealth accumulation historically has been and is home ownership. [27] It is not one's regular paycheck, but wealth is created by more permanent items, such as home equity, stocks, bonds, inheritance; your assets minus your liabilities. Wealth is, indeed, a financial resource that allows a family to become even more sustainable and financially successful, because it affords the family the opportunity to create more wealth [26].

White families historically have been in a much better position to accumulate wealth in this society, because their home ownership rates have always been higher than the rest of the population and higher than the black American rate [28]. This societal outcome is where government housing policy has been so destructive.

The home ownership rates (and the gap) perpetuated by government policy have been described as the single greatest "indicator" of a persistent "social inequality" in the US [29]. The system designed by the government, through the Federal Housing Administration, in 1934, and onward, is the chief culprit. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) for decades perpetuated a lending system in the U.S, known as "redlining." The effect of this government policy has been described as follows: Racial minorities were marginalized much more profoundly by FHA operations, a fact that makes the agency's treatment of racial issues particularly revealing. The FHA substituted questions in its publications for the industry about race into purportedly normative, social scientific guidelines for protecting the free market for housing. It defined that market as only serving white families, thus systematically, if quietly, writing people of color out of the very logic of homeownership. [30]

Shapiro's focus on wealth and racial inequality is a major part of the inequality, but there is so much more to consider regarding the problem of economic inequality in the US along racial lines. In a 2012

report, “State of the Dream 2012, United for a Fair Economy or ‘UFE’” reports serious economic disparities between persons of color in the United States and whites. The report documents significant disparities in “income” and in “wealth” in the US and details how these disparities worsened over the past 20 years [31].

The reality of the inequality was self evident in the US over the last year. The “Occupy” movement emerged in most major cities and protested growing inequality amongst the population, lack of credible job opportunities and little, if any, efforts by the state to address inequality. But the “Occupy” movement was an economic class-based movement that focused not on poverty or race, but on those who simply were disappointed they had been unable to achieve some degree of material success in the nation that has come to represent material wealth in the world in the modern era—the United States [32].

The State of the Dream report documented inequality based upon race; unequal patterns that have been in place for decades or at least since economic statistics along racial lines were collected and studied. However, the key fact of this report is, with these statistics related to economic inequality, there is a demographic shift occurring in the United States that can no longer be denied. According to the report, by 2042, the United States will be a nation where “blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders and other non-whites will collectively comprise the majority of the US population” [31]. The report makes it abundantly clear why this fact and the facts regarding inequality in the report and in other sources are so important:

Although there have been many social and political gains for all races, people of color continue to be left behind. Vast disparities still exist in wealth and income, education, employment, poverty, incarceration, and health. Extreme inequality continues to entrench and further shrink the broad middle class that has been the foundation of a strong American economy and a cohesive society. [31]

According to the report, if the inequality that has been perpetuated and engrained in the fabric of the society is allowed to persist, by 2040, when the demographic changes are self-evident, it will not only be “devastating” for these individuals and their families, it will be damaging to the “nation as a whole” [31]. The failure to promote a society with the opportunity for half or more of its inhabitants to obtain “civic equality” and “equal opportunity” would seem, on its face, to be quite dangerous and destructive [32].

For black Americans, in particular, the persistence of inequality with a racial pattern is particularly frustrating, due to the significant gains made by black Americans regarding civic opportunity in the 20th century [33]. The narrative of the struggle of black Americans to obtain more equality in the United States is important for that reason, because of their historical relationship to the nation first (for the most part) as chattel slaves (property), as members of society with second class citizenship and as part of a domestic colony within the borders of the US It is for this reason that black Americans would resist “degrowth” [34], though restorative justice [35] would be welcome.

If “degrowth” or “post-development” is to become a viable concept, it is expected that familiar social, political and economic realities would also be addressed as a transition to a vastly different society is achieved. Many black Americans have achieved great success in the United States following the end of the nation’s “Jim Crow” [36] period; however, overall, inequality persists for black Americans in nearly every discernible social, political, educational and economic category. [37]

African nations and other developing nations would also likely embrace more fairness in economic dealings before deciding that embracing “degrowth” is a path to a vibrant society.

The inequality for black Americans is not a mere complaint either; it is a statistical fact supported by hard, and often disturbing, statistical realities in every conceivable category. It is more than just Shapiro and Oliver’s assertions regarding wealth disparities along racial lines discussed above. At the present time, as reported for March 2012, the unemployment rate for black Americans is 14%. The overall unemployment rate is 8.2% [39].

Historically, the unemployment rate for black Americans has remained constant, at nearly twice the national average [40]. According to Human Events magazine, under President Bill Clinton, a quite remarkable time of economic growth, the black unemployment rate averaged 10%, while the national average was 4.5%. During the Bush years, the numbers were similar, as the rate for black Americans was 9–10%, while the national average was between 4–5%, until the end of Bush’s term, when the economy collapsed [41]. Between December 2007 and December 2008, over 3 million people lost their jobs and the unemployment rate increased from 4–5% to over 7%. The rate for black Americans, as historically has been the case, surged to over 13% [42].

When one considers income, similar statistics are present with respect to black Americans and the overall population. In 2010, the per capita income of black Americans was just 57.9% of whites [43]. This means that for every dollar that the average white American earned the average black American only earned 57 cents. In addition, the number of black households in the US earning less than \$15,000, the demographic group identified as the poorest of the poor, increased from 20% of the population to 26% of the population. [44]

Other social measures also demonstrate the persistent inequality ever present in society in the US for black Americans. In 2010, the National Urban League reported that in healthcare and education, black Americans fared far worse than their white counterparts. Based upon percentages, far more black Americans are without health insurance than white Americans, and white Americans are much more likely to have a college degree than black Americans [45]. In the area of criminal justice, there is also persistent evidence of unequal treatment and outcomes with respect to black Americans in the US. Black Americans are disproportionately incarcerated, and due to the nation’s policy regarding the enforcement of laws related to the possession of illegal controlled substances (mood changing drugs), black American men continue to be arrested and jailed for violating these laws [46].

Considering all of these disparities, black Americans should find questions of sustainability and reexamination of economic growth issues as a potential opportunity to address many of these unequal outcomes in the profit driven society of the US. However, “degrowth” also presents a paradox, especially if inequality is not addressed. At a time when many black Americans are actually achieving upward mobility, economic success and freedom and flexibility in a free market world of globalization and opportunity [47], the charge now is to abandon economic growth in favor of “degrowth”.

If there is a potential selling point for “degrowth”, it is the origin of the concept. The record indicates that, while being written by European writers, economists, advocates and scientists, the ideal has its origins in Africa [48]. This discourse developed because of the concern regarding Africa, the continent, attempts at development and the harmful effects of that failed development over much of the last 40 years [60]. This concern with respect to Africa, the continent, extended (and extends) to not only capitalist attempts at development, but also “ultra-liberal” efforts, all of which have not benefited

the people of the continent and all of which have not addressed the ecological issues created by a commitment to growth [61].

But while “degrowth” is a North-South proposition, with ideological origins in the South, black Americans, even with their unequal history in the US, are still historically part of the North. The rich traditionally industrial Western nations located in the North of the globe used and use the resources of the Southern and much poorer nations to expand and grow their economies. Africa, the continent, or at least many parts of it, is used to provide raw materials to produce products for the West (North part of the earth) [13] Black Americans benefit from that arrangement regardless of their attitude towards its existence.

Black Americans, as is well known, and often forgotten, have an ancestral linkage with these nations in Africa, but black Americans have developed as a collective in the United States and have benefited from their position in the US. Collectively, they have influenced culture, politics, history and social life in the United States, but they are on the North side of the North-South paradox.

Still, however, the initial question is how to embrace “degrowth” and how to embrace “degrowth” if at all.

## 5. “Degrowth” and Black American Autonomy

Of course, symbolically, “degrowth”, or some version of lifestyle alteration for black Americans, begets many questions for black Americans when one considers their continued unequal status in the US, economically and politically.

What will “degrowth” mean for black Americans, specifically beyond the individual choice or collective choice?

Will it mean equality or will it mean a transition to a “degrowth” society, where the same enduring inequities persist?

How will the transition from an unequal “growth” society be made and how will it be implemented?

Are past injustices, such as slavery and “Jim Crow” laws, to be forgotten or dismissed for all times in light of “degrowth”?

Is there any need to address these past injustices considering the goals of “degrowth”?

What will guarantee more equality as the transition or semi-transition occurs?

And will the implementation of “degrowth” models imperil personal freedoms of black Americans?

The poet and Chicago based book publisher, Haki Madhubuti, asked an even better question in 1987 with his poem, “Killing Memory.” The poem famously asks: “who owns the earth?” [49] The poem is a dedicated work of literature to Winnie Mandela and Nelson Mandela in the waning years of apartheid as a political shift in power seemed inevitable. The poem is a challenge; it contains both universal ideals and messages that are directed towards African people to consider questions of survival and sustainability into the future.

Haki Madhubuti is a self described black nationalist and Pan-Africanist, but his message is still applicable to all who embrace some humanistic ideals. His poem also answers the question of autonomy for Africans worldwide regarding the sharing of the planet:

most certainly not the people,  
not the hands that work the waterways,

nor the backs bending in the sun,  
nor the boned fingers soldering transistors,  
not the legs walking the massive fields,  
nor the knees glued to pews of storefront or granite churches  
nor the eyes blinded by computer terminals,  
not the bloated bellies on toothpick legs  
all victims of decisions  
made at the Washington monument and Lenin's tomb  
by aged actors viewing  
red dawn and the return of Rambo part IX. [49]

Madhubuti's African centered approach to life and in this poem is not inconsistent with the goals of "degrowth" or at least accepted models of reduced consumption and/or sustainability. It is a view with some credibility among black Americans and amongst many African nations seeking to develop their nations [50].

For Black America, the call for "degrowth" creates challenges, but also opportunity. Black Americans would need to not only address pressing concerns amongst the black American population on a multitude of social, political and economic issues, but would have to do so while at the same time altering their lives in a significant manner to conform to the new suggested economic paradigm. "Degrowth", as proposed by Latouche, is designed for a lifestyle of less work, less consumption, less reliance on the ability of the economic system to provide more and more resources and income. [13] In fact, the entire point is to cease measuring society in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the famous economic determinant [13].

If the greater population does not embrace the concept, those seeking to accept it and implement it individually or as smaller communities would not be able to exist within the larger population that elects to continue on the path many identify as inherently destructive. Simple economics makes that clear. If 10 people who have been preparing food and water each for 15 people suddenly seek to reduce that preparation by half and eight of the 10 disagree and continue to prepare for 15, the two who did decide to reduce their consumption in half will have no choice but to leave the group and form their own group in order to achieve this goal. It is, thus, possible that black Americans could depart the larger group (meaning the entire country) and implement "degrowth" or some version of it. There are instances where black Americans have acted unilaterally out of self-interest and rational thought.

In the early 20th century, as the United States shifted from an agricultural economy to an industrial, urban economy, black Americans, in mass, migrated to the nation's northern cities and to the west. [51] It dramatically altered the nation's socioeconomic arrangements and, to a certain degree, was historically cataclysmic. In addition, on a smaller level, African slaves, in the US, migrated to Canada (Nova Scotia) in the 17th and 18th century in response to an offer by England for full freedom in Canada outside the US [52]. A community of Africans continues to exist in Nova Scotia. These are just two examples where Africans (black Americans) acted out of their own need contrary to the desires of the economic system.

This unilateral decision to seek more independence in order to achieve a reduced ecological footprint is applicable to developing nations as well. Many nations, especially newly developing

nations in Africa, who are now experiencing some better fortunes due to their emerging status, could elect to address the issues of sustainability on their own if it is obvious they present a problem.

Many observers, Madhubuti included, contend that the inequality currently confronting black Americans will have to be addressed by black Americans [53]. The reliance upon the US by black Americans to provide a more equal society to all, black Americans included, is now highly questioned. Perhaps education is a field that can be isolated as just one example of this mistaken reliance and the persistent inequality.

Black Americans famously and diligently sued various state governments in the US in the 20th century for operating dual systems of education for blacks and whites [54]. In 1954, after decades of legal struggle, the US Supreme Court declared the practice unconstitutional, and this commenced the desegregation period in the US that should have led to a more equal (but not necessarily totally equal) society and, especially, educational systems [55]. However, this did not occur, and, in fact, the unequal dual system of public education system persists today, not in law, but in fact [56].

In 1992, University of San Diego law professor, Roy Brooks, in his book, “Rethinking the American Race Problem”, summarized the challenge of true racial equality and the pursuit of it by black Americans:

I do not envision the federal government charging to the rescue of African-Americans, at least not in this day and age. Even in a more favorable political climate, the government is unlikely to provide full support for the civil rights interests of African-Americans. [57]

Brooks, in 1992, and others since that time, call for a “well focused, intensive, long term program of self help”, something, Brooks asserts, “has never been attempted by black Americans in this country.”[57] Even W.E.B. Du Bois, the preeminent black American intellectual of the 20th century, and the architect of the 20th century’s legal, social and political battle for civic equality, endorsed self-help-self-preservation efforts by black Americans that would establish autonomous social and economic institutions [58].

In light of this crisis of economic and ecological conflict, Du Bois’ and Brooks’ assertion is a requisite for achieving the necessary autonomy that will allow black Americans to become true stakeholders in the debate over economic growth, equality and the ecological condition of the Earth. It is quite difficult to perceive the future in any other manner.

## **6. Restorative Justice and Post-Development**

According to historian, Lerone Bennett, “the story of black people in America is, among other things, the story of the quest for the hard rock of economic security.” [59] This struggle is basic: “bread, shelter, clothing, land, raw materials, resources, skills, and space for the heart.” Without the resolution of these basics, according to Bennett, there is “no freedom,” because “freedom is, above all else, the freedom to do” [59].

The enduring demand for justice (restorative justice) for the past is part of that quest for freedom. Indeed, even if black Americans began a long campaign of self help, as suggested by Haki Madhubuti, and as implicitly stated by W.E.B. Du Bois and Roy Brooks, this does not change the fact that restorative justice is justified considering the facts of history in the US. This in no way diminishes

anyone else's claims to a restorative remedy or any other group's claims as well; however, as explained above, inequality amongst black Americans is a fact, and it is also a fact that this inequality was perpetuated intentionally and can be linked to real events in the lives of real people. Certainly, black Americans must make decisions and choices that will address the major issues of the day, but enriching the possibility of more equality in society through restorative justice efforts cannot be ignored.

Restorative justice, by definition, is the processes "to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible" [60]. There are three principles that guide the restorative justice approach. These principles are described as follows:

- (1). Restorative justice focuses on the victims' harms and needs, not rules and laws.
- (2). Restorative justice emphasizes the responsibility of the offender to make things right and sees punishment as secondary to restoration of those affected.
- (3). Restorative justice seeks to engage all "stakeholders" in a process of creative problem-solving that addresses the needs of victims and the responsibility of offenders and seeks to reconcile everyone's best interests [61].

The United States has admitted errors in the past and sought to correct these mistakes, even when these mistakes required economic reconciliation. Two efforts that embrace this model come to mind.

The first, the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, was signed into law on August 10, 1988 by President Ronald Reagan. The act authorized the United States to pay \$20,000 to Japanese-American citizens and or descendants of Japanese-American citizens, who had been detained in internment camps by the United States during World War II [62]. It also required the United States government to issue an official apology to those who had been detained under the program. The law was the result of decades of advocacy and protest to correct a grave historical wrong that had occurred in the United States involving Japanese citizens.

The act is the arborous work of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Citizens (CWRIC). CWRIC was a congressionally created legislative entity that concluded in December 1982 that the internment of Japanese-American citizens was the direct result of "racism, war hysteria, and a failure of the nation's leadership." [62] Based upon the conclusions of the commission, it was recommended that the nation offer the victims (and descendants of those who were detained) an apology, as well as the monetary payments of \$20,000 each [63]. CWRIC, without argument, is an example of successful "restorative justice" that is monetary in nature. The key feature of this effort is the fact that Congress created an entity to investigate the claims, the investigation and research proceeded forward and those who were entitled to monetary redress actually received monetary payment. There were eligibility requirements established as well. This contributed to the legitimacy of the effort.

Another example of restorative justice in the US involves Native Americans. Native Americans, on an individual level, have been eligible for some form of restitution from the United States since 1863 for violations of treaties formed between the United States and their particular ethnic group. In 1946, Congress passed into law the Indian Claims Commission Act, a law designed to "consolidate and adjudicate Natives' claims against the federal government" [64]. While the commission experienced



numerous problems during its operations, the commission's over-arching goals are important. The commission was formed to settle land disputes brought by various nations by allowing the groups to sue the United States government [65,66]. Progress was slow, though the commission awarded \$37 million by 1961 when the agency was reauthorized to settle the remaining claims [67].

Serge Latouche's comments on "redistribution" and "restructuring" as they relate to "degrowth" are consistent with "restorative justice." Latouche is referring to a "North-South" arrangement of the planet, something he describes as a "debt", but it is still applicable to black Americans for the very same reasons. Both involve a rearrangement of the current social structures in the world. In the US, it would involve honest efforts to actually undo the injustices of the past that resulted in material benefit to whites at the expense of blacks. "Restructuring," according to Latouche involves "adapting the productive apparatus and social relations to changing values," while "redistribution" is redistribution not only on a "North-South" basis, but also between "classes, generations, individuals" and within societies [13].

In a 2009 interview published in the e-zine, Entropia, Latouche explained the attempt at restructuring:

Firstly, it is clear that degrowth in the North is a precondition for opening up of alternatives for the South...To dare degrowth in the South means to launch a virtuous cycle made up of: breaking economic and cultural dependency of the North; reconnecting with a historical line interrupted by colonization; reintroducing specific products which have been abandoned or forgotten as well as "antieconomic" values linked to the past of those countries; recuperating traditional techniques and know-how [68].

But Sally Matthews, Professor Political Science at the University of Rhodes, takes this idea to a higher level of analysis and asserts an even bolder notion: that traditional marginalized groups should make the decisions regarding development (growth) in their nations. Using Africa, the continent as an example, Matthews posits that, in making decisions regarding post-development (post growth in concept); the perspective of the Africans should be considered by the Western powers. [69] Africans, according to Matthews, don't outright reject Western ideas on development, but simply reject certain "manifestations" of development [69]. Matthews' ideas are consistent with the ideals expressed here, that those nations historically denied opportunity and some input into the affairs of their nations should be franchised as equal players and partners as the world considers a path forward for a sustainable future.

Black Americans are comparable to Matthews' model, because historically, they have been situated in a position of DuBoisian duality [70]. They exist in the United States unequally; yet, under the various "degrowth" propositions, there is no remedy to address this historical reality. The need for sustainable growth is important, but restorative justice is a prerequisite [71]. Additionally, as with Africa, ideas, control and respect are what are more important as well.

Randall Robinson, writer and former Executive Director of Trans Africa, and a writer, summed up "restorative justice" for black Americans pretty well in a 2005 interview:

I'm not talking about writing checks to people. The word reparations means to repair. We've opened this gap in society between the two races. Whites have more than eleven times the net worth or wealth of African Americans. They make greater salaries. Our

unemployment rate is twice theirs. You look at the prison system and who that's chewing up. Now we've got the advent of AIDS. Fifty-four % of new infections are in African Americans. Many infected men are coming out of prison and infecting their women. So when I talk about reparations, I say there has to be a material component. It has to have a component of education that is compensatory. It has to have a component of economic development that's compensatory. But in the last analysis the greater damage is here [points to his head]. So I'm not really talking about money. And I'm not really talking about the concerns of people who say, "I didn't benefit from slavery." Nobody said you did [72].

It is thus most important that "degrowth" and/or the movement towards a society that reconsiders economic growth as a measurement of societal success and progress be presented to black Americans as a chance to address racial inequality and racial bias as well.

## 7. "Degrowth" and Opportunity

The life of excess consumption in the US is not necessarily a recommended life, but it is a life of exaggerated worry for many and one that many will not be willing to sacrifice under the "banner" Serge Latouche calls "degrowth". Yet, Latouche's "banner" or "slogan" should be taken seriously and examined carefully, because the issues raised by "degrowth" are serious, even if "degrowth" is not the answer to the problems created by economic growth, population expansion and ecological change. Inequality, however, cannot be lost in the quest for a sustainable world, because an unequal planet is a planet of imbalance and instability.

A few questions are appropriate to summarize and to continue the discussion beyond this essay:

### *7.1. What Should Black Americans Do with Respect to "Degrowth" and other Efforts at Sustainable Solutions to the Earth's Ecological Struggle?*

Black Americans, despite our unequal status in America, do quite well compared to the rest of the world. Our most poor live considerably well compared to the poor of other nations. Most of Black America is employed, and many of us have great jobs that provide decent wages, opportunities for advancement, legal protections in the workplace, healthcare, retirement savings, paid leave and other benefits many take for granted. Some of the most affluent individuals in this society are black American entertainers and athletes and financial executives. A black American woman, Oprah Winfrey, owns her own television network. Several other black Americans are or have been in charge of some of the world's richest corporations.

However, the basic equality of the average black American is impossible to ignore. It cannot be dismissed as the complaints of a group addicted to victimization, because racial inequality is real and based upon real acts, both past and present, as discussed above. Black Americans can, however, take the lead on these issues of sustainability and become more involved in the effort to alter the world's paradigm. Black Americans are American citizens who must become more engaged in this issue. In that respect, due to the fact that the US will soon be a nation where a majority of citizens will be the former "minority" citizens of the nation, the opportunity to impact change is quite apparent. The

opportunity should not be squandered. The United States recently has offered itself the Presidential administration of Barack Obama, the first man of color to become President of one of the Western powers [73]. His election has also set into motion a re-examination of race in the US. It is also further evidence of a changing world.

#### *7.2. What Can the “West” Do to Achieve the Dual Goals of More Equality in the World, Yet a Strong Move towards Sustainability?*

The only answer in this respect is to allow the developing nations to become equal players on the world stage and to make decisions over their own affairs. The colonial period described, as represented by Bandung, is over. While remnants of the colonial period remain, the arrangements are not the same. It would be best for a more sustainable planet that is more equal to allow the colonial period to end completely and work to end it.

#### *7.3. Are the Goals of More Equality and Sustainability Able to Be Achieved in a Free Market World?*

The easy answer here is no. However, the world we live in right now is not a “free market world”. Most nations in the West are hybrid nations, where there is a free market, but where there are also government controls and government assistance to the poor, and even middle class families, to promote a standard of living. Most nations in Europe are providing health services to much of the populations, and there are other financial policies that enable more of these nations to live decent lives and to maintain decent communities. The fact that much of the world is still living in poverty under a hybrid free market system only presents more doubt as to whether a completely free market system would address the existing poverty and inequality.

#### *7.4. If Equality Is the Goal, What Will the Equality Look Like?*

Surely, all human beings will not be the same globally, at least not for quite a long time. There is always likely to be some unequal aspects of many lives. However, total equality need not be the goal. If more equality is achieved for more individuals and sustainability is also addressed, this presents great possibilities for a world that will contain far more people. Hence, Latouche’s “degrowth” ideals or any ideas dedicated to post-growth and sustainability can’t be ignored. Unless there are some major scientific breakthroughs to address the major reasons for swift ecological changes, all human inhabitants on the earth would need to address their living habits quite dramatically.

George Monbiot, in his book, *Heat*, writes in detail the various ways in which all human beings must begin to change their habits [74]. Our failure to heed the warnings of Monbiot and so many others as we pursue a more equal planet will be a colossal failure on our part. We are capable of addressing both of these issues; it is just up to us to prove it.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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