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Autonomy, Production and Degrowth

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Abstract: This paper explores the critique of productivism and the pursuit of autonomy within the degrowth conceptual framework. The prevailing economic model systematically undermines worker autonomy through hierarchical workplace structures, the commodification of labour, and the imperative for endless growth, which prioritises output over free time. The paper engages with criticisms of workplace domination and the commodification of labour. It argues that, while genuine autonomy does require mandatory workplace democracy, it does not preclude labour commodification. However, the autonomy of individuals requires dismantling the radical monopoly of labour commodification through the expansion of the set of alternative options for ensuring livelihood. This entails creating an egalitarian and pluralistic economy with diverse institutions to ensure that work, whether productive or reproductive, is freely chosen and democratically organised within ecological limits, rather than imposed by heteronomous economic forces.

Keywords: autonomy, degrowth, production, work, self-management, leisure

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream economics often dismisses or overlooks the value-ladenness of its core concepts (Małecka 2021, 88–90), whereas the political economy of degrowth explicitly grounds itself in normative foundations. Yet while scholars in this field frequently invoke values such as autonomy, sustainability, democracy, and equity, these principles often remain underdeveloped, leaving their practical implications open to wide interpretation (Parrique 2019, 252; Asara, Profumi, and Kallis 2013, 218). Among the few

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systematic treatments of degrowth's ethical framework is Timothée Parrique's dissertation, which identifies autonomy, sufficiency, and care as fundamental regulatory ideals for economic policy (Parrique 2019, 252). These values should shape every stage of provisioning, including extraction, production, allocation, consumption, and elimination (Parrique 2025). Building on this foundation, this paper focuses on autonomy in production, where the contradictions of the current economic system are particularly stark.

The productivist model undermines worker autonomy in two key ways. First, its pursuit of efficiency relies on rigid divisions of labour and labour commodification, which erode workers' autonomy in the workplace. These two features operate at distinct levels and undermine autonomy through different mechanisms.

On the one hand, the division of labour refers to the technical fragmentation of tasks into specialised, repetitive operations, which deskills workers and separates conception from execution (Braverman 1974). Within the technical division of labour, two dimensions are distinguished: horizontal (different tasks based on skills and specialisation) and vertical (supervision and management). For example, there could be a company with nine departments (horizontal division of labour) with three levels of management (vertical division of labour). Marx, using the example of an orchestra and the importance of the conductor, implied that some vertical division of labour would perhaps be needed even in a post-capitalist society (Marx 1990).

On the other hand, labour commodification is the broader systemic process through which human labour power becomes something bought and sold on a market, so that access to the means of subsistence is conditional on selling one's labour. The division of labour concerns the internal organisation of the labour process, while labour commodification concerns the macro-institutional conditions under which work is undertaken at all. A worker could, in principle, labour under a detailed division of labour within a non-commodified setting (for example, in a self-sufficient household), just as commodified labour could in principle be organised without a strict technical division of labour. The autonomy-undermining force of contemporary production derives not from any of these features alone but from their systematic combination and mutual reinforcement. Keeping them analytically distinct is essential for assessing which feature a degrowth society must eliminate and which it may reform or retain.

Second, because economic growth is treated as an end in itself, productivity gains are reinvested into further production rather than reducing labour inputs. As a result, despite unprecedented productivity, working hours remain high, reducing free time for activities that cherish other values besides utility.

Together, these attacks on workers' autonomy are concrete manifestations of the imperial mode of living, or hegemonic freedom, which generates and reproduces a "common sense" that equates economic growth with the good life (Spash 2025; Brand and Wissen 2021). Degrowth responds to these challenges by advocating for democratically organised, convivial production processes that prioritise worker autonomy, along with a reduction in working hours instead of perpetual output expansion. However, this approach reveals a fundamental tension between autonomy at work (meaning self-directed labour) and autonomy from work (meaning more leisure time). If production that relies on the division and commodification of labour—despite its alienating nature—enables greater leisure, while non-commodified, convivial alternatives preserve autonomy at work but reduce free time, which should a degrowth society prioritise? This tension reflects a deeper theoretical challenge for degrowth: can a society reduce production and consumption democratically without sacrificing liberation from toil? This paper seeks to clarify degrowth's normative priorities and contribute to a more coherent vision of a just and sustainable economic organisation.

There are three influential figures in degrowth thought, especially when it comes to the issue of autonomy: Cornelius Castoriadis, Ivan Illich, and André Gorz. In the first section, I will elaborate on the notion of autonomy on a more general level, drawing on interpretations of Castoriadis by contemporary degrowth thinkers such as Viviana Asara, Emanuele Profumi, Giorgos Kallis, Timothée Parrique, and Serge Latouche. In the second section, I will use insights from Illich and Gorz to place the issue of autonomy in the context of production. Considering that Castoriadis comes from the continental philosophical tradition, the level of resonance between his understanding of autonomy and that prevalent in the analytical tradition is surprisingly high. I will draw some parallels with concepts and theories from analytical philosophers to ensure the clarity of Castoriadis's position for readers from different backgrounds.

I. Towards a Procedural Autonomy Account in Degrowth Theory

Understood in its etymological sense—as a self that is governed by its own laws—autonomy excludes "governing by alleged natural laws of the market or the dictates of modern techno-science and experts" (Asara, Profumi, and Kallis 2013, 221). While this definition is illuminating because it emphasises the impossibility of autonomy within the context of capitalism and/or elitism, it is too narrow because it does not capture the vast array of influences beyond them that could threaten individual autonomy. Parrique provides a more general account of autonomy, built mostly on the work of Castoriadis (Parrique 2019, 253), defining it as an act of making decisions "critically and deliberately without dominating influences from the outside" (Parrique 2019, 252). This definition is in alignment with the standard hierarchical account of personal autonomy developed in the analytical tradition by Harry Frankfurt and Gerald Dworkin (Frankfurt 1971, 5–15; Dworkin 1976, 24–25). According to this view, individuals should authorise their preferences through critical assessment that is not distorted by so-called illegitimate external influences (Christman 1987, 281–293).

Parrique's description of these influences as "dominating" reflects a further development in thinking about the conditions that undermine an agent's independence. This line of thought resulted in the insight that such conditions are best understood in republican terms, as freedom from arbitrary power (Oshana 2006, 76–94). This is how Parrique defines domination: "If dominator person A has power over a dominated person B, it means that A has the capacity to interfere with B's choices in such a way that the choice imposed by A would feel alien to B (B's actions and thoughts depend on the arbitrary will of A). It also means that the interference is at A's discretion and B has limited possibility to exit the relationship" (Parrique 2019, 254).

This is the standard account of domination associated with the work of republican political philosophers like Philip Pettit (1997), Quentin Skinner (1998), and Frank Lovett (2010). The standard account of domination is primarily interpersonal. According to this account, agents, whether they are individuals or groups that are able to express a unified will, dominate each other. Social, economic, and legal institutions are relegated to merely tools through which domination is performed, but do not depend on them.

In contrast, a structural understanding of domination emphasises the constructive role of institutions in the creation of a situation of domination. In order for an agent to assume the social role of dominator or subordinate, the institutional structure conducive to the establishment of such a power dynamic as legitimate has already to be in place. Thus, it is not that employers dominate workers via the employment relation, but that labour law dominates the workers, denying them equal standing (Hasan 2021). With a structural understanding of domination, it could be better understood how productivism as a system infringes the autonomy of individuals, beyond the personal drive for domination of any particular agent. In this way, the undue attribution of personal responsibility for the current level of constraint on the autonomy of many could be avoided.

The issue of arbitrary power or illegitimate influences raises the question of the interplay between autonomy, freedom, and justice. In everyday usage, autonomy is too often mistakenly conflated with the notion of liberty. While freedom is a lack of obstacles to achieving our goals, autonomy is a lack of obstacles in formulating them. A person can be autonomous and unfree, and vice versa. However, the notions of liberty and autonomy are closely related. Without autonomy, freedom is not particularly meaningful because its whole point is that we fulfil our own preferences, not the preferences of others. Thus, autonomy is a precondition for meaningful liberty. On the other hand, without freedom, autonomy is undermined in the long run due to the human tendency to ease the frustration of cognitive dissonance by adapting preferences to circumstances. This is a normal process, and in a situation of relative justice, it is a healthy way to establish a balance between one's abilities and aspirations. But in the context of long-term injustice, it can lead to a malign type of adaptive preference that should not be recognised as autonomous.

Adaptive preferences, in their negative connotation, seem connected to Serge Latouche's notion of the decolonisation of the imaginary. Latouche finds the roots of this notion in Castoriadis's concept of the imaginary and critiques of imperialism. At the same time, these two ideas, together with ecological critique, are the roots of degrowth (Latouche 2014, 117). Therefore, the projects of decolonising the imaginary and degrowth are closely related.

While the notions of ecological and anti-imperialist critique are quite straightforward, Castoriadis's concept of the imaginary seems difficult to translate into an appropriate concept from the analytical philosophical tradition. Following the hierarchical, two-part structure of human volition

established by the Frankfurt-Dworkin account of autonomy, the imaginary could be understood as a second-order preference upon which the (absence of) identification with first-order preferences is based. For example, a productivist imaginary would be a second-order adaptive preference that authorises first-order preferences for labour commodification or a workplace hierarchy, establishing a pseudo-autonomous choice towards unsustainable and unjust forms of labour.

However, there are two problems with translating the notion of the imaginary into a second-order preference. First, the imaginary seems to be a family of similar preferences, not just one. This means a productivist imaginary would entail numerous preferences that revolve around the same core but tackle different parts of one's life, thereby creating a certain worldview. In terms of scope, the notion of the imaginary would be closer to John Rawls's concept of a comprehensive doctrine—a moral, religious, or philosophical theory that provides answers to a wide variety of morally relevant questions in day-to-day life—rather than to the extremely narrow concept of a second-order preference (Rawls 1993). Second, unlike a second-order preference or comprehensive doctrine, the imaginary is not something an individual can change alone. People can achieve a change of the imaginary only together (Latouche 2014, 118). Accommodating these differences, the imaginary can be understood as a comprehensive doctrine that is not changeable at the individual level. A productivist or growth imaginary would therefore be the dominant comprehensive doctrine that people can overcome, but only collectively.

When it comes to the notion of (de)colonisation, Latouche stresses the symbolic character of this concept's use in the context of the Global North, where "we are victims and agents" of "self-colonization" (Latouche 2014, 119). Latouche uses different words to describe the (de)colonisation of the imaginary, from relatively mild terms like "uprooting a belief" (Latouche 2014, 118), "acculturation," and "de-culturation," to stronger ones like "conversion of mentalities" and "a mental invasion" (Latouche 2014, 119). These notions are value-laden. Why is the term "a mental invasion" or "colonisation" used for productivism but not for degrowth? Does the content of the imaginary determine whether it will be labelled as colonial, or is it the procedure through which it is embraced?

Take, for example, Parrique's response to the wellbeing critique—that is, the misconception that degrowth would lower the standard of living for many people. He calls for a more nuanced approach towards interpreting preferences for overconsumption. Making an analogy with

addiction, Parrique questions the autonomy of preferences that are incompatible with planetary limits. The initial discomfort of overconsumers with degrowth policies is actually a good sign, showing that their behavioural change has started. Presumably, after they are no longer under the distorting influences of advertising and social pressure, they will be able to express more sustainable and autonomous preferences.

> We, addicts of a consumerist society, find ourselves in the same situation than [sic] Ulysses and the mermaids: we know we will not be able to trust our immediate desire in the beginning of the transition because we will be under the spell of the mermaids of consumerism, and so we must set objective criteria (e.g. quotas of consumption in accordance with ecological sustainability) and accept a momentary reduction in liberty, in the same way that Ulysses asked his boat crew to tie him to the mat [sic] while the boat was set to sail in a specific direction (Parrique 2019, 413).

This line of reasoning risks ending in a substantive understanding of autonomy. It is all well and good to address various forms of manipulation and choice architecture that illegitimately influence agents to decide in one direction or another. But it is quite another thing to presuppose that they would, save for these influences, prefer a frugal way of living. When it comes to the content of autonomous preferences, it is essential to maintain an agnostic attitude about the preferences of others; otherwise, one could exercise unwarranted paternalism. Castoriadis also emphasised that there is no pre-given blueprint for what the content of an autonomous decision should be (Castoriadis 1997, 274). Open-endedness is a crucial trait of Castoriadis's understanding of autonomy. As Asara, Profumi, and Kallis (2013, 235) write: "Castoriadis reminds us that we cannot and should not define what will be the outcome of collective creation, as praxis entails the individuals as the ultimate agents of the development of their autonomy."

Latouche's focus on civic education as an autonomy-enhancing influence and on the influence of media as a non-legitimate influence suggests that his understanding of the (de)colonial character of the imaginary is a procedural one. However, these are only some of the ways in which agents can be manipulated, and this is far from a comprehensive elaboration of the independence required for protection from the colonisation of the imaginary.

A discussion about autonomy presupposes a background theory of justice, one that provides clear guidance about the level of equity and liberty to which individuals are entitled. Only within the context of such a background theory of justice can one reliably estimate whether an influence is an infringement on an individual's autonomy or a legitimate kind of influence that should be tolerated or even encouraged in a degrowth society.

Michael Cholbi (2018), in his analysis of the desire for work as an adaptive preference, besides unjust social conditions, emphasised the role of unthinkability in the detection of adaptive preferences. Injustice is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the formation of adaptive preferences. Just because some preference is formed in unjust social conditions, it does not mean that there is a necessary causal connection between them. For example, I can be dominated in the workplace, but that does not mean that because of that my preference to have a tuna sandwich instead of a ham sandwich for lunch break is adaptive.

The notion of unthinkability can help us to differentiate between preferences that are independently formed in a situation of injustice from those that are caused by it. Unthinkability is reflected in the impossibility of seriously imagining an alternative state of affairs. Cholbi argues that social policies that made public assistance contingent upon employment, the preparation for the job market as the main goal of education, and the aspiration for full employment across the political spectrum created a dominant work-centric culture in which post-work alternatives are not seriously engaged regardless of widespread dissatisfaction with work, thereby exposing the adaptive character of the preference for work.

The preceding discussion yields a procedural conception of autonomy with two complementary dimensions. Individually, autonomy requires that agents critically reflect on and author their own preferences, free from domination and the distorting pressure of adaptive preferences rendered unthinkable by an unjust institutional landscape. Structurally, it demands background conditions that ensure the options among which individuals choose are genuinely open. This framework provides the normative lens through which the following section examines the degrowth critique of heteronomy in production. The central question is whether the institutional features of contemporary production withstand scrutiny when measured against the procedural requirements of autonomy.

II. The Degrowth Criticism of Heteronomy in Production

Degrowth is the planned and democratic reduction of production and consumption in rich countries to decrease environmental pressures and inequality while improving wellbeing (Schneider, Kallis, and Martinez-Alier 2010; Kallis 2011). As such, degrowth challenges the productivist logic of contemporary capitalism. Productivism is the principle that production should be an end in itself, so that more production is always better (Parrique 2019, 278). Since production requires labour, productivism implies squeezing the maximum possible working time from people, which is a frontal attack on their leisure time, that is, autonomy from work. If the workplace is understood as a place of domination, then every free hour is an hour rescued from heteronomy. But productivism requires exactly the opposite: that people spend as much time as possible in a setting where their autonomy is not respected. In this way, it is a principle that straightforwardly undermines the autonomy of workers.

Thus, from the perspective of autonomy, the problem with productivism lies in the combination of its maximalist character (maximisation of output) and the heteronomous nature of the large majority of contemporary labour. This heteronomy, however, is not the product of a single institutional feature. It arises from the interplay of two distinct elements: the technical division of labour, which separates conception from execution and deskills the worker, and the commodification of labour, which makes access to subsistence conditional on selling one's labour. Productivism exploits both elements, maximising output by intensifying the division of labour and compelling participation through the structural dependence created by commodification.

If it is taken as a principle that an individual or collective should implement without prior authorisation, it would follow trivially that productivism violates their autonomy. Following Castoriadis, many degrowth authors emphasise the importance of endorsing a principle based on critical reflection for autonomy. For example, Asara et al., interpreting Latouche's view on autonomy, note: "(…) liberation from an externally-posed, not-to-be-questioned objective of economic growth is part and parcel of the movement towards autonomy" (Asara, Profumi, and Kallis 2013, 221).

But that would be the case with any principle endorsed in such a way; that is, it would not be autonomy-undermining because of the principle itself, but due to the character of the process through which it is introduced. Thus, we should consider whether, and in exactly which ways, productivism is autonomy-diminishing, even if it is agreed upon by all

who are affected by it. From a proceduralist perspective, are not all decisions that we consent to upon critical deliberation by definition autonomous, including those that embrace economic growth? As Clive Spash put it: "What (…) are the grounds for intervention against the interests of others (…) invested in the imperial mode of living? In particular, an apparent conflict arises between degrowth and the common sense idea of freedom as individual choice which is embedded in modern market capitalist institutions" (Spash 2025, 198).

The answer depends on from which point in time we are speaking. If we are speaking about that specific decision, it would be autonomous if it is endorsed in a setting free from dominating influences. But the same decision, although autonomous, can generate conditions of dependence that are not compatible with the autonomy of other agents or the same individual in the future. Thus, my aim is to show how productivism creates autonomy-undermining conditions, regardless of whether it was an autonomous choice at some moment. Of course, this is an idealisation conducted for theoretical purposes. In practice, productivism has never been an autonomous choice by any collective. This is because in free-market capitalism, decisions about the level of investments are not under democratic control (Houtbeckers 2025).

Waheed Hussain (2023) argued that the market economy is a mechanism of social control because it draws economic agents (workers, consumers, investors) into a specific pattern of production and consumption. The market is also an authoritarian mechanism of social control because it bypasses the practical judgments of economic agents about the pattern to which it draws them. The authoritarian character of the market is not obvious because there is no centralised authority that creates rules that govern economic agents, but it is hidden behind decentralised individual choices that nevertheless shape the behaviour of market participants in a way that is not reason-sensitive, and thus infringes their personal autonomy. This is happening through a mutual adjustment structure which is "an institution whose rules are structured so that the choices each participant makes from within her option set help to define the option sets open to the other participants in an iterative process" (Hussain 2023, 72). Normally, economic agents experience the mutual adjustment structure through the price system which directs their behaviour. However, since they always have some option set in front of them among which they can freely choose, the authoritarian character of market governance is not apparent to economic agents. Therefore, a decrease in leisure time under

current circumstances cannot be justified through the collective authorisation of productivism.

That is not to say that in a context where this decision was under democratic control, persons, individually or collectively, could not autonomously decide to sacrifice some leisure time for the production of a certain good that satisfies an authentic need. But it is hardly imaginable that any contemporary collective would, if given the chance, autonomously embrace productivism as a principle according to which all production should be governed without risking their future autonomy. Such a collective would have to be very numerous and have a small baseline overall production, so that embracing productivism as a principle would not (for some time) endanger anyone's free time. However, with permanent economic growth, even such a collective would in time lose the capacity for ever-increasing production without decreasing the autonomy from work of its members. It is also questionable whether the leisure time of some members of such a collective would not be violated even earlier, considering that an equal distribution of work is not the most efficient way of organising production. That brings us to the issue of productivity and its relation to productivism.

The other work-related way productivism undermines autonomy is more nuanced. Productivity contributes to productivism through the more efficient use of resources, which allows the production of the same output with less labour and/or materials (Parrique 2019, 279). Thus, productivity is in alignment with the productivist goal of the maximisation of output, but not in perfect alignment. Productivity contributes to productivism only if, and only as much as, the saved inputs are invested in further production, increasing total output. Otherwise, productivity liberates saved inputs for other pursuits and does not maximise output. Although in a degrowth context, labour productivity could possibly contribute to autonomy from work by shortening working time, the current economic setting—in which any productivity gains are utilised for further growth—does not allow that. Often, productivity gains result in a rebound effect. The rebound effect increases consumption as a consequence of higher efficiency. Since productivity gains are usually reflected in lower prices for the product, this could stimulate consumers to spend more on the same (direct rebound effect) or other (indirect rebound effect) products.

Even if productivity gains were not used for output increase, a degrowth case against some forms of productivity gains could still be

made. Productivity gains are absolute if the gain of one factor in production is not achieved by increasing the use of another. Therefore, to have an absolute productivity gain, at least one factor of production should become more productive, while others should stay at the same level. If a productivity gain of one production factor comes at the expense of another, lowering its productivity, that is a relative productivity gain. From a productivist perspective, the makeup of a productivity gain is not important as long as the saved inputs are put towards further economic expansion. From a degrowth perspective, however, it makes a difference whether a labour productivity gain is achieved through a more intensive use of machinery or natural resources, as that could put excessive pressure on environmental limits (Parrique 2019, 279).

Of special importance for this paper is a similar tension that can be found even in absolute labour productivity gains without any rebound effect. In such cases, the productivity gain is normally achieved through more efficient labour management. It is believed that the division of labour smooths the production process and generates productivity gains. The contemporary economy is largely characterised by extreme professionalisation and managerial discretion, often justified because they deliver higher labour productivity. They are a form of immaterial technology, understood broadly as any design that helps people to "solve problems and achieve goals" (Alexander and Yacoumis 2018).

However, this efficiency can come at a cost to autonomy in the workplace. The employment contract is a deviation from the conviviality that should guarantee autonomy in the domain of production. Following Illich's idea that the design of a tool determines its use (Illich 1975), one can argue that the division of labour and managerial power are not only methods to improve labour productivity; they are also institutions for creating an exploitative hierarchy incompatible with autonomy in the workplace for all.

The question of how labour market and labour management technologies affect the net autonomy of workers has been sidelined. Within degrowth thought, one finds two distinct visions of what autonomous production might mean, and they map onto the distinction between the two sources of heteronomy identified above. One vision emphasises autonomy *from* work: the maximisation of free time, which requires challenging the structural compulsion to sell one's labour (labour commodification). The other vision emphasises autonomy *at* work: labour that occupies a significant portion of one's life but is organised without the

hierarchical division between conception and execution and without subordination to an employer's command (the division of labour). The tension between these two visions is not merely a matter of emphasis. It reflects different diagnoses of which feature of contemporary production is the primary obstacle to autonomy.

II.1 Criticism of Workplace Domination

Normally, we think positively about tools that provide higher efficiency of production because we presuppose that the goods produced are indeed necessary and useful. In that way, the same output can be produced with a smaller amount of labour and, in the context of a competitive market, at a lower price.

However, Castoriadis questions not only the compatibility of workplace hierarchy with self-management but also its alleged benefits (Castoriadis 2020). In companies where workers are not simultaneously the owners, they are in a structural conflict with the company owners, which results in the employer's need to organise coercion to make them work. Ensuring that workers follow orders and fulfil their tasks, regardless of what they think about them, is the primary function of workplace hierarchy. Far from being an institution that resolves conflict on the job, workplace hierarchy actually creates it by imposing the will of management on employees. If workers had a say about the goals of production and the ways in which accountability in the workplace is ensured, the current level of control would be unnecessary due to the higher intrinsic motivation of workers for their jobs. More importantly, the remaining tools for establishing accountability would be democratically authorised, and thus, the autonomy of workers would not be violated as it is today.

Castoriadis's argument is based on the rejection of the validity of the transfer of decision-making to other instances, including that which is facilitated through the employment contract. This is in alignment with his rejection of representative democracy in general. For Castoriadis, only direct democracy is compatible with the autonomy of individuals, both outside and within the domain of production. One cannot simply outsource one's autonomy to others for eight hours per day. Self-legislation is inescapable. The difference between autonomy and heteronomy lies in the individual's awareness that they are the ones making the choice. Heteronomy is characterised by the mistaken imputation of responsibility to a third party and the absence of an understanding that one is deciding, even

when one decides to submit to the will of another (Asara, Profumi, and Kallis 2013, 232).

From Castoriadis's criticism it follows that, except in rare enclaves, such as worker-managed companies, decision-making in the domain of production is not democratic. Even in worker-managed companies, decision-making is often not fully democratic (if vote weight reflects unequal ownership of the company), or it is democratic only in a representative form which leaves no room for meaningful participation and deliberation (for example, if employees only elect a board of directors). This means that through hierarchical workplace management, the autonomy of virtually all employees is violated on a daily basis.

Besides being incompatible with self-management—which is nothing less than the expression of collective autonomy in the workplace—hierarchy is also inefficient. Hierarchy is produced through the creation of unidirectional channels of communication through which all information about the business is hoarded by management, while employees receive from them only orders with the minimal information necessary to successfully fulfil a task. This asymmetric distribution of knowledge about the production process not only makes workers more alienated from their work (and thus less intrinsically motivated to do it) but also hinders their initiative and inventiveness, from which the company could benefit by improving productivity (Castoriadis 2020).

Gorz agrees with Castoriadis's reasoning about the division of labour. Gorz offers a similar argument. He debunks the myth of the higher efficiency of the division of labour by citing empirical studies that show the opposite (Gorz 1973, 8–9). One could wonder why production is organised through the division of labour if it is less efficient than a more convivial approach to work. Gorz's answer is that the hierarchical division of labour establishes the effective power of the employer over the employees, which is necessary because workers are not intrinsically interested in their jobs. He ascribes this lack of authentic interest to the fundamental fact that workers do not produce for themselves, but for a surplus value that will not be appropriated by them. Management's attempt to achieve obedience through the simplification of work tasks and increased external control creates a reinforcing loop, making jobs even less desirable and generating even more resistance from the workers (Gorz 1973, 10).

Additionally, Gorz offers an indirect argument against the division of labour. The character of innovations changed in the early 1950s in such a way that they no longer decreased labour time. Due to the more

competitive nature of capitalism, innovations were indeed primarily concentrated in capital goods to reduce labour costs and enable production of "the same volume of goods with a decreasing quantity of social labour" (Gorz 1973, 7). But when capitalism entered its monopolistic phase, in which the market was saturated with existing products, the character of innovation began to change, switching its object from capital goods to consumer goods. Now, innovations are primarily directed towards creating new products and opportunities for profitable capital investment—that is, expanding production, including the need for labour. However, these new products hardly have more utility for consumers. Gorz describes their use value as no greater, or even smaller, than that of previously available goods (Gorz 1973, 7). The new products are made purposefully more obsolete and complex (or less convivial) to curtail consumer autonomy and independence. The main purpose of these new products is to stimulate economic growth, but they no longer add extra value to consumers' lives (Jackson 2009).

To sum up, a reconstruction of Gorz's and Castoriadis's argument against the division of labour is twofold: first, it is an empirical fact that the division of labour is not a more efficient mode of production; the real reason employers introduced it is to control workers more effectively through deskilling. Second, even if it were true that the division of labour is indeed more productive, those interested in autonomy in the domain of production should still not view this institution positively because it is not compatible with self-management, and, from the second half of the 20th century, it has been employed as part of a capitalist expansion that does not contribute to general wellbeing.

A common objection to this position holds that managerial authority is not solely an instrument of class control. It also solves coordination problems, reduces transaction costs, and integrates specialised knowledge in complex organisations (Coase 1937; Williamson 1985). From this perspective, some vertical division of labour and delegation to managers are functionally necessary for efficiency, especially as enterprises grow. The objection draws empirical support from the behaviour of worker cooperatives. Although founded on democratic self-management, cooperatives tend to adopt managerial hierarchy once they reach a certain scale. For example, Tom Malleson (2014) surveys cooperatives across Europe and North America and finds that most employ managers and that the separation between the conception and the execution of work persists in many cooperative settings. The Mondragón cooperatives, often

cited as the most successful large-scale example of worker self-management, operate with multiple tiers of management and a clear hierarchy, although managers remain accountable to a general assembly of worker members (Whyte and Whyte 1991). Pencavel (2001) shows that the successful plywood cooperatives of the Pacific Northwest increasingly adopted formalised management structures and hired professional managers for day-to-day operational decisions.

If workers autonomously decide to delegate authority to managers whom they elect and can recall, one might argue that this arrangement is fully compatible with their autonomy. Theorists of workplace democracy such as Robert Dahl (1985), Roberto Frega, Lisa Herzog, and Christian Neuhäuser (2019) discuss representative structures within firms as analogous to representative democracy in the state. David Ellerman (1990) acknowledges that democratically controlled firms may legitimately delegate managerial functions, provided that ultimate authority rests with the workers as a body. As long as representatives are accountable and the basic constitutional rules are subject to democratic revision, autonomy is preserved. A procedural account of autonomy cannot rule out the possibility that workers, after critical and unforced deliberation, might choose to appoint managers to coordinate their labour, as long as the delegation is revocable and the fundamental aims of the enterprise remain democratically determined.

Nevertheless, the empirical observation that cooperatives adopt hierarchy at scale is context-dependent. It occurs within a capitalist economy that compels firms to compete on efficiency grounds and penalises those that prioritise democratic deliberation over speed (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007). George Kokkinidis (2012) argues that the claim that representative democracy is a "realistic" alternative to hierarchy actually reproduces and legitimises hierarchism by limiting the imagination of what organisational democracy could be. The question, therefore, is not whether workers in the abstract could autonomously choose representative forms of workplace governance. It is whether the institutional landscape of contemporary capitalism makes hierarchy nearly inevitable, thereby foreclosing the possibility of a genuinely autonomous decision. A degrowth society that pluralises the options for securing a livelihood would simultaneously expand the range within which workers could meaningfully decide about the organisation of their labour. Under those transformed conditions, workers might autonomously choose to adopt some managerial roles for coordination and efficiency. What matters for autonomy is not the

abolition of all delegation, but the transformation of the background conditions that currently render heteronomous work compulsory.

The workplace-domination critique, thus refined, is fully compatible with the procedural conception of autonomy. The systematic, institutionally enforced division between those who decide and those who execute violates this condition even when it is formally endorsed by a vote, insofar as that endorsement occurs under conditions of structural dependence and the unthinkability of alternatives. The demand for workplace democracy, in its direct and participatory form wherever feasible, therefore follows directly from the procedural account without imposing any particular vision of the good life. It is a demand about the conditions under which choices are made, not about the content of those choices.

II.2 Criticism of Labour Commodification

The preceding subsection addressed the autonomy-undermining features internal to the labour process. We now turn to the distinct critique of labour commodification, which targets not the internal organisation of work but the macro-institutional conditions that make selling one's labour compulsory. If we take a radical understanding of the exit option as the option not to work at all, that would be in alignment with the understanding of autonomy as freedom from labour pioneered by Gorz (1982). According to Gorz, an autonomous person is one "who can engage in activities of their choice regardless of them being considered 'work'" (Parrique 2019, 253).

Gorz's view on work is radical in one more regard. Gorz writes that wage labour cannot be autonomous by definition. No matter how much we improve working conditions or include employees in the management of the company, wage labour will remain heteronomous because these features do not end commodification, which is the main source of the heteronomy of work (Gorz 1989, 169). According to Françoise Gollain's reading of Gorz: "any autonomy in work must not be confused with a broader, 'existential' autonomy (…) autonomy implies calling into question the alarming expansion of the commercial sphere to the detriment of the non-commercial sphere" (Gollain 2018, 61–62). In other words, for Gorz, autonomy requires the decommodification of work. To be successful, self-managed enterprises, like hierarchical ones, have to subordinate themselves to the economic imperative of creating a surplus. Production for the market sidelines the issue of intrinsic motivation and the pleasure

that people derive from autonomous activities, and in that way makes them heteronomous (Gorz 1989, 166–167).[1]

How does Gorz's understanding of autonomy relate to Parrique's definition of domination? Can the commodification of labour be considered a form of domination? The example that he gives suggests that it can. "The long-term unemployed who wants to be a nurse but decides to become a bank teller instead is alienated from that choice, which is imposed by the outside (here the impossibility to become a nurse, the availability of jobs at the bank, probably together with *the imperative to earn a living*)" (Parrique 2019, 254, my emphasis).

However, production has to be organised in some way. If the commodification of labour were to pass genuine democratic legislation because it generates more time for autonomous activities, what arguments could be made against it from the standpoint of autonomy? There are two that should be seriously considered.

II.2.1 The Radical Monopoly of Labour Commodification

Illich introduced the concept of a "radical monopoly" for tools whose dominance limits one's personal autonomy in an extreme way (Illich 1975, 65–71). In contrast with a regular monopoly, which forces people to purchase from only one producer if they want a certain good, a radical monopoly does not leave any room for the absence of a need for a particular product. A radical monopoly creates a need for a certain tool, making the lives of those who do not use it very difficult or even impossible. In a certain sense, a radical monopoly is a form of artificially created inevitability that curtails the autonomy to choose otherwise and do differently.

[1] According to Gorz, not all non-commodified activities are autonomous activities. Gorz differentiates autonomous activities in the narrow sense from work-for-oneself. While work-for-oneself is simply a non-commodified form of labour that still produces a service or good, just without exchange value, autonomous activities "are neither necessary nor useful", but they "constitute an end in themselves" (Gorz 1989, 153). If one were to accept such a narrow understanding of autonomous activities, this would constitute the most demanding criticism of work, one that rejects even non-commodified, self-managed labour as non-autonomous. I do not engage with this type of criticism of heteronomy in production here because I consider it the least plausible. It is unclear how the production of useful things could negatively affect the autonomy of others or the future autonomy of the person producing it, if that is done in convivial way and within ecological limits. If anything, goods and services help people to satisfy their preferences, and in that way, enable autonomy. Thus, while autonomy requires reasonable leisure time, it does not preclude any labour, provided that it allows one to truly freely decide about their work-time/leisure-time ratio.

It reduces the pre-existing abilities of people to rely on their own knowledge, experience, and strength in satisfying their needs without a particular tool. Some examples of products that have established radical monopolies are cars, formal education, telephones, and computers. A radical monopoly can exist in combination with, or without, the presence of a regular monopoly. For example, one can write a paper using computers with different operating systems, but one cannot submit a handwritten paper to a journal.

This is how the story about radical monopoly looks from the consumption side. However, it seems that employing this concept for thinking about production can help us better understand the constraining nature of the way labour is performed today. What would be an example of a radical monopoly in the domain of production? If we look at institutions as a form of immaterial technology, the institution of the employment contract, as the dominant form of securing reproduction, could also be considered a form of radical monopoly. A regular monopoly in the labour market would mean that only one employer is able to create job offers. The absence of this kind of monopoly can increase people's options, but only to a certain level. Even when workers have the possibility to switch employers, they still need to sell their labour to someone because their reproduction is dependent on an income. Since most people cannot rely on income from capital, their lives would become very difficult if they did not commodify their labour. That option is virtually closed in growth-oriented economies due to the link between labour commodification, profit-making, and further capitalist expansion.

Since any kind of human-made radical monopoly curtails autonomy, a pluralisation of tools—including a pluralisation of institutions that enable meaningful choice among different lifestyles—is necessary. In the context of labour, that would mean that through various other institutions, such as universal provision, a job guarantee, commoning, cooperatives, and other non-commodified labour arrangements, the dominance of the employment contract should be diluted, establishing a real choice in the ways of securing a livelihood.

The republican political tradition has long recognised that an option is not genuinely open if its exercise depends on the permission of a dominator or is so costly as to be practically foreclosed. In the context of labour, exit from a particular job is insufficient for autonomy if one must immediately re-enter another relation of subordination to survive. Wage labour should not necessarily be abolished, but its status as a radical

monopoly must be ended so that the choice to enter an employment contract can be truly autonomous.

II.2.2 Unequal Access to Free Time Due to Economic Inequalities

Whereas the ecological limits of growth are reflected in the limited ability to decouple GHG emissions and material use from economic growth, the social limits of growth are reflected in the limited time that each of us individually, but also collectively, has at our disposal. Since economic activities require time, never-ending growth is not possible because there would eventually not be any more people able to dedicate additional time to further production or consumption. More importantly, the limitation of collective working time (for doing both productive and reproductive tasks) creates a zero-sum game where time dedicated to a certain activity is always time less for another (Parrique 2025).

Part of the tertiarisation of the contemporary economy is the ever-increasing commodification of labour that people (predominantly women) previously performed as work-for-oneself, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children and elders. According to Gorz, the commodification of domestic labour is happening due to a general scarcity of jobs, but also because of an unequal distribution and valuation of the working time of different workers. This means that professionals are more likely to work full time, and that their working hour is valued significantly more than the working hour of an employee in the booming industries that provide services meant to replace work-for-oneself. Only under these conditions is it rational for such a professional to pay someone else to do a chore instead of them, in order to make their free time more convenient and more open for autonomous activities.

This dynamic goes beyond the service economy. Consider the case of cars, for which it is calculated that they are only subjectively faster than a bike if we factor in the labour time spent earning the money to purchase them, not to mention the labour time necessary for producing all accompanying infrastructure and the time needed to neutralise the negative externalities they produce. Of course, this calculus depends directly on the income of the individual. For high-wage or wealthy individuals personally, it is not irrational to drive a car because they can purchase one with less or no labour time of their own, thereby directing the labour time of others towards the production of a technology that is, from a collective standpoint, a time-eater.

Increasing income inequality creates a context "in which one part of the population monopolises the well-paid activities and forces the other part into the role of servants" (Gorz 1989, 156). Gorz describes the same dynamic that Castoriadis pointed to in arguing against differences in wages (Castoriadis 2020). Only under conditions of economic equality can price properly reflect the strength of the preferences of market actors. Otherwise, a minor preference of the well-off can easily outcompete an essential need of the poor.

An awareness of time limitation politicises our usage of time. Under conditions of democratic control of the economy, people would be in a position to choose to what extent they are ready to sacrifice time for autonomous activities to produce need satisfiers. But under conditions of economic inequality and the radical monopoly of the employment contract, the well-off generate time-scarcity for everybody else to achieve time-abundance for themselves.

However, Gorz's claim that wage labour is heteronomous by definition because it subordinates production to exchange-value rather than to need imposes a substantive standard on what counts as an autonomous activity. A procedural account cannot rule out the possibility that agents might autonomously prefer commodified labour because it efficiently generates the means for free time. However, this does not render the labour commodification critique irrelevant. When commodification forms a radical monopoly and is compounded by economic inequalities, the choice to enter an employment contract is not reliably autonomous. The problem is not commodification *per se* but the institutional landscape that makes it compulsory. Procedural autonomy therefore requires not the abolition of commodified labour but the dismantling of its radical monopoly and the establishment of economic equality, ensuring that the decision to sell one's labour is genuinely autonomous.

II.3 The Institutional Shape of Autonomy-Respecting Production in a Degrowth Economy

Workplace democracy is a necessary condition for autonomy in production, but not a sufficient one. A worker-controlled enterprise that operates within a growth-dependent economy must still subordinate its decisions to the imperatives of market competition and the profit-driven investment logic. Autonomy in production therefore requires democratic control not only over the labour process but also over the broader economic framework that determines what is produced, how much, and

under what constraints. In other words, degrowth requires economic democracy. This subsection outlines, in broad strokes, how a degrowth society could institutionally secure such democratic control.

Besides the introduction of workplace democracy, parts of the economy that are appropriate for public management, such as strategic sectors and communal services, should be nationalised. A degrowth society presupposes advanced political democracy which will ensure that nationalised parts of the economy are under continuous and effective democratic oversight, as well as that nationalisation is conducted with the clear goal of degrowth, not simply to transfer further capital accumulation from private hands to the state, continuing growth-oriented business as usual.

The core challenge concerns the investment process. In capitalist economies, investment decisions are made privately, guided by expected profitability rather than by democratic deliberation about collective needs. This arrangement should be replaced with a system in which every company contributes a part of its surplus value to a community-controlled investment fund. After that, a democratically coordinated investment process would follow. While the overall direction of investment is subject to democratic deliberation, community-controlled investment funds must respect collectively agreed caps on resource use and emissions. In order to acquire investment, a company first needs to ensure it is sustainable, then convivial, and only within the framework of these two considerations can efficiency of production be pursued. This is the totally opposite dynamic to the current system where productivity is above all other considerations (Parrique 2025).

For example, Michael Albert (2003) describes a participatory planning investment process in which investment proposals are initiated either by a workers' council or by a consumers' council. Consumer councils are nested geographic bodies ranging from neighbourhood to national levels that express the collective consumption preferences of citizens. These proposals are then debated and refined through nested federations of councils from local workplaces and neighbourhoods up to national bodies. The whole process is facilitated by specialised councils that process information without making decisions, providing indicative prices that reflect full social costs and benefits, including ecological externalities and effects on job quality. The relevant council federation, which includes both the workers' councils that will carry out the project and the consumers' councils that will be affected by or benefit from it, evaluates

proposals using social benefit to cost ratios, not private profit. For a project to be approved, both the affected workers' councils and consumers' councils must reach agreement through deliberative voting procedures, ensuring that neither producers nor consumers can unilaterally impose an investment. Thus, this type of investment process is democratic, transparent, and oriented towards long-term social and ecological well-being.

A common objection to planning, dating back to Hayek (1945), is that it cannot handle the complexity of information required to coordinate a modern economy. For example, democratic planning was criticised by market socialists because it places too heavy a decision-making burden on consumers (Schweickart 2006). However, the degrowth commitment to reduced material throughput makes democratic coordination more feasible, not less. The degrowth economy deliberately reduces the scale and complexity of production by prioritising need satisfaction over profit and by scaling back ecologically destructive and socially superfluous sectors (Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan 2022). The information problem is eased by the localisation of much production, the reliance on convivial, low-tech tools, and the expansion of non-commodified forms of provisioning, such as universal basic services, that do not require market-like coordination at all.

If democratic planning nevertheless shows itself to be unfeasible, a market solution could be pursued, provided that it ensures reason-sensitivity and transparency (or at least trustworthiness). Hussain (2023) has suggested a codetermination-inspired "intermediated market arrangement" in which competitive markets are kept, but they are accompanied by secondary associations that will be able to influence the rules of competition and redirect it from economic growth for its own sake. These secondary associations would include not only workers' associations, but also consumer and environmental associations.

These institutional visions directly connect autonomy in production to the wider degrowth project. It is a proposal to reorganise the economy so that people can collectively decide how much to work, what to produce, and how to distribute the fruits of their labour, all within planetary boundaries. The pluralist institutional ecology they envision is designed to make the choice of work arrangements a genuine expression of autonomy rather than a forced response to the radical monopoly of commodified labour. In sum, autonomy in production in a degrowth framework requires a twofold transformation: democratic self-management within enterprises and democratic coordination of the investment that shapes

the economic landscape within which those enterprises operate. Together, these transformations create the material and institutional conditions under which workers can genuinely decide their work-time and free-time ratios rather than having them dictated by heteronomous economic forces.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the degrowth critique of heteronomy in production through the lens of a procedural conception of autonomy. It has argued that the demand for workplace democracy follows directly from the requirement that individuals author their own choices, while the demand for the total decommodification of labour does not. However, the paper has also shown that when commodified labour becomes a radical monopoly and when economic inequalities enable the well-off to externalise their labour time onto others, the conditions for autonomous choice are systematically undermined. Autonomy therefore requires workplace democracy, economic equality, and a pluralist institutional landscape that dismantles the radical monopoly of the employment contract.

These conclusions carry implications beyond the degrowth literature. The fundamental task of the degrowth movement is to balance our autonomous preferences and ecological limits. In order to complete this task successfully, the degrowth movement needs reliable information. While for ecological limits we can rely on scientific knowledge, there are no experts for human preferences, save the individuals themselves. This both implies the creation of opportunities for people to voice them, but also to dig deeper than expressed preferences. The procedural account of autonomy, far from being normatively inert, can generate demanding institutional prescriptions when coupled with an analysis of structural constraints. The paper identifies the conditions under which expressed preferences can be considered autonomous, and it shows that contemporary economic institutions systematically fail those conditions.

At the same time, the paper shows why the degrowth normative framework deserves closer attention from political philosophers. Personal autonomy is too often theorised in an ecological, and even economic, vacuum. While economic independence is sometimes recognised as one of the requirements to be autonomous, the constraints that ecological limits put on our autonomy are generally absent from philosophical discussion. Degrowth is not merely a critique of GDP growth. It is a proposal to restructure the economic preconditions of autonomy. By

linking workplace democracy, the pluralisation of livelihood options, economic equality, and democratic control over investment to a procedural ideal of autonomy, degrowth offers a coherent vision of an autonomous society that does not rely on a substantive account of the good life.

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