

## A Plea for Degrowth

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**Reviewed:** Olivier Rey, *Une question de taille*, Stock, 2014, 288 p., €20.

**That progress has negative effects is a well-worn idea. Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that they ensue from the excessiveness brought about by technological progress. Does that mean that there exists a scale favourable to the thriving of humans?**

The development of technology has inspired many negative diagnoses about the state of the world. Changes brought about by the domination of science and technology have become so tangible that it has now become a cliché to bemoan the harmful or negative effects of progress. In *Une question de taille*, Olivier Rey, too, makes disillusioned observations about the progress associated with modernity, post-modernity, indeed hypermodernity. Yet, while his predecessors, such as Günther Anders in *The Obsolescence of Man* (1956), have highlighted the losses (p. 31) that characterise the modern and contemporary eras, they have not, according to the author, sufficiently emphasised the fact that they raise “questions of scale”.

This omission, the author argues, overlooks the most acute contemporary problem, that is, excessiveness (“*la démesure*”) and the loss of limits that guide current human activity, especially as far as technological development – a “factor of illimitation” (p. 215) – is concerned. The loss of a sense of proportion that we experience because of science and in the context of liberalism is problematic, for when organisations and systems grow beyond a certain threshold, they “become autonomous” and make us dwell in the general (p. 207). Faced with overly general problems, affecting too great a number of persons and too vast geographical areas, there is a risk that our ability to act in a world adapted to our size might be negated, especially with respect to morality.

Hence, according to Rey, downsizing is the only “sensible way” to take if we wish to move forward (p. 205). It is *the* fundamental “question of scale”, which requires a return to “due measure”, to what is proportioned, which Plato and Aristotle recommended. The point is not to criticise gigantism for its own sake, as growth could be desirable in some circumstances. Our era, however, leaves no doubt as to the pressing importance of downsizing.

Yet it is not that easy to put the case for scaling down into practice. This is all the more so given that they require us first to be aware of the decisive role of scale in the conduct of human affairs. To allow the reader to acquire that awareness is the author’s aim, which he achieves by dealing with scale in two ways. On the one hand, he considers the concrete domains in which scale is at stake, that is, in urban policies in the development of technology in general, and in political organization. He turns, on the other, to philosophers and scholars such as Galileo, who made it possible to show that “there are no invariants through changes of scale” because “quantity determines for the most part possible qualities” (p. 168); that is, to show that “the essence of a thing comprises the order of magnitude to which it belongs” (p. 167)

To take into account questions of scale is all the more pressing that their importance has been under-estimated in proportion to the role they have come to play in human affairs during the modern and contemporary era. They have not been sufficiently taken into account by philosophy either during this period. They form a “blind spot” in contemporary thinking, whereas “just as some living form develops at a certain scale and remains alive only within certain limits, most concepts have been elaborated within a specific, explicit or implicit quantitative horizon, beyond which they lose their applicability” (p. 170). The author goes so far as to speak of “modern philosophy’s disgust of the mere mention of the question of number”, a disgust which has prevented us from ensuring that excessiveness, “the question of number”, does not insinuate itself where it has no place (p. 190-191).

Thus convinced that the more we ignore the question of number, the more it risks overwhelming us, Rey devotes a large part of the seven chapters of the book to drawing our attention to questions of magnitude, scale and number – which are synonymous here – drawing from Ivan Illich’s work and from a vast sociological, philosophical, and theological

body of texts. It is in the domain of morality that the loss of a sense of proportion is the most damaging, especially concerning the degree of responsibility that each one of us exercises towards great social problems and the scale at which it is possible to act.

### **Ivan Illich, a model**

*Une question de taille* consists partly of a monograph on Ivan Illich, philosopher and dissident Catholic priest, who was born in 1926 and who died in 2002, and whose biography and bibliography are detailed in an appendix. During the 1970s, Illich had a vast following in North America and in Europe, before being largely neglected (p. 75). His followers came from the pragmatic right as well as from the extreme-left. Rey is particularly interested in how Illich called the imperative of growth into question in his analyses of modern means of transportation, education, health services, work, and leisure. Illich believed that “there exists a threshold beyond which development becomes counterproductive and is detrimental to or damages the situation that it is meant to improve” (p. 34). The acceleration of means of transportation is a case in point for illustrating the idea of “relevant scale” that Illich and his followers, such as Jean-Pierre Dupuy, have defended. That relevant scale, which is linked with the “good”, is defined as that which has the “right size”, the latter being “a size beyond which what served life ... begins to be detrimental to it and to ruin it” (p. 97). As means of transportation have improved, so has the time to get to work increased, given that the distance between home and the workplace has increased in proportion to the increase of means of transportation. Hence, the time spent travelling to work further and further away from home has exceeded the time that the improved means of transportation have allowed workers to save. Not to mention the fact that the speed of the means of transportation includes the time it takes to earn the means of acquiring them (p. 38). There is, moreover, a speed adapted to human scale: a car should not go faster than 15 miles/hour, because our “relation to the world” could be otherwise annihilated, just as it is when we use planes and high-speed trains (p. 42).

Disregarding these thresholds as technology allows us to do or creating counter-productivity in the fields of education and medical care also leads to paradoxes, according to Illich. For beyond a certain threshold, preventive care, for example, reduces individuals’ autonomy and thus makes them rely on the institutional structures taking charge of them. Rey renews these ideas and adapts them to the contemporary world: faced with “the gigantic socio-economico-

technological machine”, “the reduced man” that we are becomes powerless without his/her “server”. It is this dependency that makes us develop the fantasy of an “augmented man” (p. 68). Rey thus emphasizes the quantitative contents, if not of technological progress itself, then at least of its vocabulary. In Illich’s vein, the author rejects the idea that man can actually be “augmented” or modified through technology, because this would require that we erase the nature/culture distinction. The author unambiguously rejects that erasure, which he associates with “post-modernism” that encourages making life “technological and artificial” for economic benefits (p. 206).

### **A crisis of bigness**

Illich was himself inspired by the sociologist Leopold Kohr, who was his mentor during the 1950s. In *The Breakdown of Nations* (1957), Kohr had called the idea of growth into question by putting forward the following apparently reductive idea: “There seems to be only one cause behind every form of social misery: *bigness* ... Bigness appears to be the one and only widespread problem in the world. *Wherever something is wrong, something is too big*”. This is true, for example, as far as the size of human societies is concerned, societies whose problems grow faster than their ability to solve them (p. 85-86). The breaking down of the world into small states opens the way, Kohr claimed tautologically, to a form of lost freedom: “the freedom towards *big problems*” (p. 90). Hence Kohr could state, for example, that delinquency increases in proportion to the size of societies, because the feelings that forestall it – “the sense of interdependency, of belonging, and of the common good” – are dispelled in inverse proportion to their scale. Kohr went so far as to state that “number alone causes a decline in the level of morality” (p. 92), just as late nineteenth-century crowd psychologists (among whom the representative Gustave Le Bon) thought that number itself entails a lowering of the intellect (exemplified by the jury). He also argued that overly large societies “inclined us to do evil” (p. 187), a consequence that Rey takes up from Kohr in his ethical discussion of great numbers. Changes of scale are so determinant, Kohr believes, that contemporary social problems differ from previous times with respect to their scale only.

The moral sphere is thus not just any sphere of application among others of Kohr’s and Illich’s theses on scale. Size itself has a moral content. According to Kohr “the one and only problem in the world is not evil but excessive size; not the thing that is too big, whatever it is,

but its oversize itself” (p. 97). Rey would seem both to argue that everything that is “large” causes damage, and that the point is not to decry this or that size, but rather to look for what corresponds to “the size most likely to allow human lives to flourish and to be fruitful” (p. 102-103). The author alternates between these two lines of argument.

The latter idea is linked to the two meanings of measurement in Plato (*Politics*, 284e). Measure points, on the one hand, to the activities that aim to measure “the numbers, lengths, depths, breadths and speeds of things” and, on the other, to the expertises “that measure in relation to what is in due measure (*to metrion*), what is fitting (*to prepon*), the right moment (*to kairion*), what is as it ought to be (*to deon*) — everything that is removed from the extremes and taken to the middle (*meson*)” (p. 97-98). Due measure has been lost because the first meaning of measure has been dominant. Husserl has associated that domination with the emergence of objective sciences, which have been delegated to take quantitative questions in hand, and have been prevented from developing other ways of conceiving of the world. To seek to find due measure again is a way of reinstating the limits that have been abolished by excessive, scientific and technological development, the motto of which is always to “advance the frontiers”. The author sarcastically opposes that motto, which forms part of the CNRS logo, to a fifth-century BCE Athenian stele found in the Acropolis Museum, which must have been used as a boundary marker for athletes (p. 111-114).

### **Due measure**

Hence, if quantitative problems must be reckoned with – for it is still necessary to measure the world in order to criticise its bigness – this is done so as to find due measure again, by means of a theologically inflected examination of the consequences of its loss. Among these, “the forgetting of scale in ethical reflection” or in “moral thinking” (p. 182) leads us to the central question of the book: what is the scale of political, social and ethical action? Which scale befits political, social and ethical action? What is the due scale of political, social and ethical action? Rey cites at length a passage from Witold Gombrowicz’s diary, which brilliantly stages this question. The Polish writer tells of how, while dozing off on an Argentinian beach, he was led to save a dying beetle that had been knocked over by wind, and how he was gradually made aware that there was in fact a crowd of beetles in distress which he frantically began to help one after the other. The story reaches its climax when the narrator realizes that, given the unlimited number of beetles scattered across an immense expanse of

sand, he will certainly have to take a “terrible and almost abject” decision to stop saving any of them (p. 184-185). For Rey, this drama shows how dangerous great numbers can be, for they oblige the narrator to act unjustly, to become indifferent to the fate of the beetles. Great numbers, according to Elias Canetti, “make us immune to horror” (p. 185), and make us opt for inadequate solutions to social problems, ill-fitted because they are conceived for society of limited sizes. By approaching the problem of great numbers in moral terms, the author takes the risk of moving towards late nineteenth-century crowd psychology dominant ideas about the dangerousness of the masses, which have since become received ideas on numbers, and which resurface with each demographic and migratory crisis. This risk contributes to making the author’s plea about the importance of “questions of scale” a very persuasive one. Rey however only sketches the analysis of great numbers in relation to the darkest moments of our recent history, in order to insist on the idea that there exists a “scale fitted to the happy expression of humans”, and that the latter is not “indefinitely extensible” (p. 99).

### **The human scale**

Rey provides an erudite and original plea for degrowth by taking us on a fascinating detour through a number of themes such as the loss of the cosmos, the development of print culture, the quantity/quality opposition, and the concept of measure as “due measure”. In extending that latter notion outside the strict bounds of the politico-economical domain, the author succeeds in renewing the conceptual bases of current debates on degrowth, even though he does so by referring to Illich’s work, published a few decades ago, and to critiques of the modern world that were formulated at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Georg Simmel’s analysis of urban life. Are these critiques of modernity still relevant, given that technological progress has allowed important changes of scale? Does every epoch and scale not require specific analyses?

Rey gives a prominent place to the question of what constitutes an insect’s “right size”. He is inspired by the biologist J. B. S. Haldane’s 1926 article entitled “On being the right size”, in which Haldane explains the convergence between size and function, which precludes changes of scale as far as the living is concerned. Rey transposes these findings into the domain of the human. While there exist scales adapted to humans, they have ceased to serve as a standard. Instead, excessive scales and large numbers have become threatening because humans risk losing control of their world. One is left wondering, though, whether it is possible to determine once and for all a scale adapted to human beings, given that the “due measure”

which the author enjoins us to retrieve is a matter of morality, and therefore, a matter of what precludes measurement.

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