

# Beyond Growth: Technology, Work, and Time in the Construction of a Social-Ecological Rationality. A Dialogue between Gorz, Latouche, Illich, Sennett, and Winner

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91200010>

Received: 11 December 2025; Accepted: 19 December 2025; Published: 30 December 2025

## ABSTRACT

This article proposes a critical and integrated analysis of the perspectives of André Gorz, Serge Latouche, Ivan Illich, Richard Sennett, and Langdon Winner to examine the profound contradictions of capitalist economic rationality and outline the foundations of an alternative social-ecological rationality oriented towards sustainability and autonomy. These thinkers, stemming from distinct intellectual traditions (social philosophy, ecological economics, institutional critique, craftsmanship anthropology, and philosophy of technology), converge on a shared diagnosis: contemporary societies are shaped by a productivist rationality that subordinates human autonomy, ecological sustainability, and cooperative practices to economic accumulation and technological determinism [1, 2].

We argue that the logic of unlimited growth, central to this paradigm and fundamentally critiqued by Gorz and the degrowth movement, colonizes lifetime, instrumentalizes technology in its "closed" form, and empties public discourse of concrete ethical content, as Winner points out [1, 3]. In response, we propose that the notions of **"open" and "convivial" technologies** [11], **craftsmanship** as a reflective dialogue between hand and intelligence [13], and the pursuit of **"liberated time"** [2] for self-realization constitute the interconnected pillars of a necessary socio-ecological emancipation project [2]. Gorz's proposal for a liberated time society, integrated with the degrowth platform, offers a coherent framework for emancipation, demanding not just a reduction in working time but a cultural, technological, and practical reorientation that revalues autonomy, reflective craftsmanship, and political action over the inertia of economic growth [1]. Overcoming the profound confusion in values, diagnosed by Winner [15], requires transcending abstract discussion and anchoring our proposals in concrete material and organizational practices that prefigure a post-growth society, where well-being, cooperation, and sustainability replace accumulation and market efficiency as the organizing axes of social life [2].

**Keywords:** Degrowth, Economic Rationality, Open Technologies, Convivial Tools, Craftsmanship, Liberated Time, Social Critique, André Gorz, Serge Latouche, Ivan Illich, Richard Sennett, Langdon Winner, Social-Ecological Rationality.

## INTRODUCTION

### The Critique of Growth Rationality and the Pursuit of Autonomy

The 21st century faces a multifaceted crisis—ecological, social, and existential—whose roots intertwine in the paradigm of unlimited economic growth, the core of capitalist rationality [1, 16]. This paradigm, based on profit maximization and productive efficiency, has generated persistent inequalities and an accelerating depletion of natural resources, promoting a total commodification of life that undermines community bonds and individual autonomy [16, 1]. Contemporary societies are marked by the dominance of a productivist and economic rationality that measures social success primarily through unlimited economic growth, labor output, and technological expansion [2]. This system's structural unsustainability is established by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's Entropy Law [1], which provides an undeniable scientific foundation for the critique: perpetual physical growth is thermodynamically impossible on a finite planet [1].

Faced with this multidimensional crisis, fragmented or purely technocratic responses prove insufficient [1]. There is a need to articulate an integrative framework of thought that, starting from a solid critique, can outline the contours of an alternative rationality: a social-ecological rationality [1]. This article seeks to weave a constructive dialogue between five key thinkers—Gorz, Latouche, Illich, Sennett, and Winner—whose works, while stemming from related intellectual traditions, are rarely brought into direct conversation [1, 2]. These thinkers share a suspicion toward the assumption that technological and economic expansion inherently signals progress [2]. The objective is synthetic: to identify and connect the fundamental components of a coherent alternative to the prevailing model, demanding a radical re-evaluation of fundamental concepts: work, leisure time, and technology [2].

## Article Thesis

We argue that Gorz's proposal for a liberated time society, integrated with the degrowth platform articulated by Latouche and Illich, offers a coherent framework for emancipation. This emancipation not only requires a reduction in working time but a cultural, technological, and practical reorientation that revalues autonomy, reflective craftsmanship, and political action over the inertia of economic growth [1, 2]. We seek to answer: How does the radical critique of growth relate to a new conception of work, technology, and public ethics? ¿In what way can concrete practices and the tools we use prefigure a different world? [2].

We structure the argument in four main movements: Gorz's critique of economic rationality and the project of degrowth, integrated with Latouche and Illich; the political dimension of technology (closed vs. open and convivial); Sennett's revaluation of craftsmanship as prefigurative practice; and Winner's essential corrective regarding the confusion in ethical discourse and the need for a material ethics.

While the present article is primarily theoretical, its framework is not detached from contemporary transformations. Phenomena such as digital platform labor, the rhetoric of "green growth," and the increasing automation of work illustrate how economic rationality continues to colonize time, technology, and subjectivity under new guises. These developments reinforce the relevance of the conceptual dialogue proposed here, even though a detailed empirical analysis of such cases exceeds the scope of the present contribution.

## Economic Rationality and Its Dissolution: Gorz, Time, and Degrowth

The starting point is André Gorz's critique of economic rationality, a logic that subordinates all human purposes to profit maximization and unlimited growth [1]. This rationality colonizes lifetime [5], transforming waged work into the gravitational center of existence and reducing "free time" to a mere functional appendage: a time for consumption and recovery, with the sole aim of restoring productive capacity for the next labor cycle [1, 2]. Gorz exposes the perversion of this system by pointing out that "the existence of millions of workers cannot be secured except through the systematic waste of the wealth they produce" [5]. Work thus ceases to be a meaningful activity to become an abstract economic obligation [1]. This logic is not only ecologically unsustainable but profoundly alienating, devaluing leisure and leading to individual alienation [1].

## The Devaluation of Leisure Time

Gorz criticizes the ideology of work, where it is presented not only as a means but as an end in itself [1]. Under this logic, leisure is not a space for fulfillment but a period of compulsory consumption necessary to reactivate production [1]. To understand the magnitude of this alienation, it is useful to reference Hannah Arendt's classical distinction in *The Human Condition* [7] between:

- **Labor:** The activity tied to biological necessity and survival (consumption and reproduction).
- **Work:** The creation of durable objects, the artificial world.
- **Action:** The free and political interaction among individuals.

The critique asserts that consumption capitalism reduces the majority of human existence to **Labor**, limiting the space for meaningful **Work** and, crucially, for free **Action**, which is relegated to devalued "free time" [1].

## Towards the Society of Liberated Time: The Degrowth Framework

The logical consequence of this critique is the radical reduction of waged work time and the consequent liberation of time [1]. Gorz thus postulates the "society of liberated time" [4], where "work is not, nor should it be, the essential thing in life" [5], advocating for the adoption of the "norm of sufficiency" [2]. This reclaimed time is not passive leisure but "socially productive time" dedicated to self-renewal, cooperation, and personal development outside the instrumental logic of the market [1]. In terms of Jürgen Habermas [8], this liberated time is essential for **Communicative Action**, allowing the construction of social and political relationships not mediated by capitalist **Instrumental Action** [1].

This perspective aligns directly with the degrowth movement, which proposes the necessary socio-political and ecological framework [1]. The degrowth movement—articulated most prominently by Serge Latouche [9]—emerges as a direct political and ecological critique of the ideology of development and the belief in unlimited economic expansion [2]. Degrowth is not recession but a project of "orderly withdrawal from the opulent consumer society" [6] that redefines prosperity, decoupling well-being from material accumulation [1, 2]. It finds its ineludible basis in the ecological economics through Georgescu-Roegen's Entropy Law [1], establishing physical economic growth as impossible and unsustainable in the long term [1].

Latouche provides a pragmatic program for change, summarized as the "eight R's" (Re-evaluate, Reconceptualize, Restructure, Redistribute, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Relocalize) that guide the transition [9, 1]. This project has a profound dimension of social justice. Joan Martínez Alier [10] introduces the concept of "ecologism of the poor," showing that the environmental costs of unlimited growth (e.g., resource extraction) are unequally distributed, affecting the most vulnerable communities [1]. Degrowth is thus an imperative for both ecological sustainability and social equity [6].

Ivan Illich complements these ideas through his critique of industrial society's institutionalization of basic human needs [2]. The convergence between Gorz, Latouche, and Illich lies in their shared recognition that alternative social models require both ecological limits—a bio-physical imperative—and a profound cultural transformation, resulting in a reorganization of everyday life, work, and technology towards post-opulence [1].

## TECHNOLOGY AND AUTONOMY

### The Distinction Between Closed and Open/Convivial Tools

The transition to a liberated time society and the degrowth model is unviable without a profound reconfiguration of the technologies we use [1]. Technology is, in this analysis, a political and social battleground [1].

#### Closed vs. Open Technologies (Gorz)

Gorz distinguishes two clear technological models [3]:

- **Closed Technologies:** These are the instrumental arm of economic rationality [3]. Designed and controlled by large corporations, their internal logic is one of profit maximization, planned obsolescence, and creating user dependency [1]. They are inherently political, as their material architecture configures power relations and consolidates centralized control, perpetuating the control necessary for the growth paradigm [1, 2].
- **Open Technologies:** These are accessible, sustainable, repairable, adaptable, and promote autonomy and self-management [1, 2]. They are designed to serve the community, not capital accumulation [1]. Gorz is categorical that there can be no political autonomy without a technical base that enables it [3].

### Conviviality and Technological Democratization

The notion of open technology is amplified by Ivan Illich's concept of "**Convivial Tools**" [11]. A tool is convivial when "it is at the service of the person integrated into the collectivity, and not the other way around" [11]. Convivial tools are characteristically appropriable, sustainable, and decentralizing. They avoid the need for

monopolies of knowledge or production, aligning closely with both Latouche's political project and Gorz's distinction between autonomous and heteronomous spheres [1, 2].

The choice between technologies is fundamentally political [1]. Andrew Feenberg [12] argues that technology possesses a **"Double Character"**: although its initial design may be shaped by capitalist rationality (closed technologies), it can be democratized and re-signified through social participation [1]. The challenge is not to reject technology *per se* but to transform it to reflect values of autonomy and sustainability, converting it into an instrument for liberated time and conviviality, in line with contemporary concepts like "design for conviviality" [17]. A socio-ecological rationality requires a technological transition towards the open and convivial, where tools empower rather than create dependency [2].

## CRAFTSMANSHIP AS PREFIGURATIVE PRACTICE

### The Thinking Hand and the Ethics of Care (Sennett)

If capitalism alienates the individual through instrumentalized labor, the proposal for emancipation must redefine work as an intrinsically meaningful activity [1]. Richard Sennett's philosophy provides a fundamental piece by recovering the figure of the craftsman not as a romantic ideal, but as an epistemological and ethical model of engagement with the world [13, 2].

### The Indivisible Unity: Hand and Intelligence

Sennett's central contribution is revealing the dialectical unity between the hand and intelligence [13, 2]. Opposing the Cartesian dichotomy that separates thought from action, Sennett demonstrates that the deepest knowledge is embodied and material [1, 2]. The **"intelligent hand"** solves problems, experiments, and learns through tactile and reflective interaction with materials, a process he terms "reflection-in-action" [1, 2]. He argues that the hand not only executes but "thinks," forging human intelligence through sustained dialogue between the craftsman and their work [13]. This process requires "learning to distance oneself from a problem... to better appreciate what it is about and then return to it with a new attitude" [13]. Craftsmanship is, therefore, a constant source of adaptive, practical reflection [1].

### Craftsmanship and Liberated Time

This conception makes craftsmanship the living antithesis of alienated labor [1, 2]. The craftsman maintains control and comprehensive understanding of the entire process, with motivation stemming from the "simple pleasure of doing something well" and the pursuit of quality [14, 2]. The relevance of Sennett in the context of Gorz and Degrowth is multifaceted:

- **Meaningful vs. Alienated Work:** Craftsmanship serves as the ideal model of work for liberated time, providing self-realization outside the economic sphere. It is the paradigmatic meaningful activity for Gorz's "liberated time" [1, 2].
- **Durable Creation and Ethics of Care:** Craftsmanship focuses on the creation of durable objects, embodying **Work** (according to Arendt [7]), which aligns with the degrowth goal of reducing consumption and promoting reuse and repair [1]. Furthermore, the craftsman is the quintessential user of open/convivial technologies, engaging in an ethics of care and deep understanding antithetical to the "use and discard" logic [2].
- **Community Formation:** Sennett emphasizes that craftsmanship requires and fosters cooperation and the exchange of skills [14]. This supports Gorz's vision of a society that values self-organization and human development [1].

Sennett thus provides the model for a way of being in the world that combines material autonomy, critical reflection, and an ethics of quality, prefiguring the relationships and reflective forms of practice of a post-growth society [2].

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## WINNER'S WARNING

### Beyond the Confusion in "Values," Towards a Material Ethics

The construction of an alternative rationality faces a formidable obstacle in the very language of contemporary public debate [1]. Langdon Winner [15] acutely diagnoses that discussion about "values" has become "a symptom of profound confusion" [15]. According to his analysis in *The Whale and the Reactor* (1986), the term has degenerated into an abstract, subjectivized, and depoliticized concept that replaces more robust moral categories such as "justice," "rights," or "common good" [1, 2].

### The "Values" as Evasion of Reality

Winner states that "The longer this talk goes on, the emptier it is and the more removed from any solid ground" [15]. This language becomes a smokescreen that allows structures of power to avoid direct confrontation with the real, negative effects of technological and economic development [1]. The focus on abstract "values" prevents one from asking: Who truly benefits from this economic model? and What kind of society are we building? [1]. This conceptual confusion leads to the atrophy of ethical argumentation and the evasion of concrete political responsibility [1, 2].

### Reestablishing the Political Discourse

Winner's critique is an essential corrective: it alerts us against the temptation to present degrowth, open technologies, and craftsmanship merely as a new set of abstract "values" in the marketplace of ideas [1, 2]. The strength of the Gorz-Sennett proposal lies in its foundation in concrete material practices and social structures [1]. The "norm of sufficiency" is not a slogan but a principle that emerges from the reorganization of production and time; the "dialogue with materials" is a corporeal experience [2]. Winner's critique thus urges us to anchor ethics in materiality [1].

Social-ecological rationality is not promoted primarily through manifestos of values, but through the creation of institutions (such as cooperatives managing open technologies), the enabling of time (the reduced workday), and the fostering of practices (craft and repair workshops) that, in their very functioning, embody and teach a different relationship with the world, work, and others [1, 2]. Winner's critique reinforces the need to ground the ethical discourse of transformation in concrete arguments of ecological and social justice, conviviality, and autonomy [1].

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Weaving the Framework of a Strategic and Convivial Shift

By gathering the threads of this five-voiced dialogue, a coherent and synergistic framework for a social-ecological rationality is revealed [1, 2]. This is not the sum of independent parts but an ecosystem of ideas where each component potentiates and requires the others [2]. The current crisis is fundamentally a crisis of rationality and priorities: the hegemony of the economic logic is not only bio-physically unsustainable (Georgescu-Roegen [1]) but also alienates the individual and generates social injustice (Martínez Alier [10]) [2].

The convergence of these five authors contributes to a robust, multidimensional theoretical model that challenges productivism and outlines the interconnected pillars of an alternative social-ecological rationality [2, 3]. The society of liberated time emerges as a project of emancipation that demands a strategic shift [6] across four interconnected axes:

1. **Time and Production:** The radical reduction of waged labor to foster **Communicative Action** and self-realization (Gorz [2], Habermas [8]). This aligns with Degrowth's political-ecological project of "orderly withdrawal" from post-opulence (Latouche [9]) [1].



2. **Technology:** The adoption of **Convivial Tools** (Illich [11]) and open technologies that promote self-management and decentralize power (Gorz [3], Feenberg [12]), providing the material infrastructure for autonomy and making liberated time meaningful [2].
3. **Work and Practice:** The revaluation of work through **Craftsmanship** as a model of reflective, meaningful, and durable activity (Sennett [13], Arendt [7]), providing the qualitative content for liberated time and an ethics of care and quality [2].
4. **Ethics/Politics:** The overcoming of the **confusion of values** (Winner [15]) to ground Degrowth and technological transformation in concrete arguments of ecological and social justice, conviviality, and autonomy, enabling effective transformative political action [1].

Although the convergence among Gorz, Latouche, Illich, Sennett, and Winner reveals a powerful shared critique of productivist rationality, important tensions remain. Illich's radical skepticism toward large-scale institutions contrasts with Gorz's willingness to engage policy mechanisms such as work-time reduction and income guarantees. Similarly, Winner's emphasis on technological politics introduces a more cautious stance toward democratization than some convivial or degrowth approaches. Rather than weakening the framework, these tensions underscore its richness and prevent its reduction to a unified doctrine.

## Final Implication

True prosperity does not reside in unlimited material accumulation but in the wealth of liberated time and individual and collective autonomy [1]. The path towards conviviality and post-opulence is the only one that guarantees the essential balance between human well-being, social equity, and the health of the planet [1]. A synthesis of these traditions contributes to contemporary debates on post-capitalist futures, ecological transition, and democratic governance of technology, forming the pillars of an alternative social-ecological rationality [2]. This strategic shift is essential to building a future that values a full life over the quantity of goods consumed.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article is intentionally conceptual and synthetic in scope. As such, it does not provide detailed empirical case studies of contemporary socio-technical configurations such as digital capitalism, platform labor, or green-growth policy frameworks. Further research would be necessary to test and refine the hypotheses advanced here through comparative empirical analysis, institutional case studies, or ethnographic approaches to work, technology, and time use.

Additionally, a more systematic examination of the divergences among the thinkers discussed—particularly regarding institutional design, political strategy, and technological governance—would enrich future theoretical developments. Addressing these dimensions would allow a more fine-grained assessment of how a social-ecological rationality might be operationalized under diverse historical and political conditions.

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### **Ethical Considerations**

The research conducted did not involve human subjects (patients) as the object of investigation.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research, the data collection, or the publication of the findings.

### **Data Availability Statement**

All data necessary to support the findings of this study are contained within the article text itself. No additional data are available in external repositories.