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# The Degrowth Alternative

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Both the name and the theory of degrowth aim explicitly to re-politicize environmentalism. Sustainable development and its more recent reincarnation “green growth” depoliticize genuine political antagonisms between alternative visions for the future. They render environmental problems technical, promising win-win solutions and the impossible goal of perpetuating economic growth without harming the environment. Ecologizing society, degrowthers argue, is not about implementing an alternative, better, or greener development. It is about imagining and enacting alternative visions to modern growth-based development. This essay explores such alternatives and identifies grassroots practices and political changes for facilitating a transition to a prosperous and equitable world without growth.

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## Ecology vs. Modernity

The conflict between environment and growth is ever-present. For “developers,” the value of growth is not to be questioned: more mining, drilling, building, and manufacturing is necessary to expand the economy. Against developers stand radical environmentalists and local communities, who are often alone in questioning the inevitability of “a one-way future consisting only of growth.”<sup>1</sup> In this opposition to development projects, philosopher Bruno Latour sees a fundamental rejection of modernity’s separation of means and ends.<sup>2</sup> Radical environmentalists recognize that ecology, with its focus on connecting humans with one another and with the non-human world, is inherently at odds with growth that separates and conquers.

The rise of mainstream discourse on sustainable development effectively erased the radical promise of ecology. The notion of sustainability that emerged from the 1992 Earth Summit neutralized and depoliticized the conflict between environment and growth. Since then, negotiations between government, businesses, and “pragmatic” environmentalists have assumed that new markets and technologies can simultaneously boost economic growth and protect natural systems. Environmental problems have been largely consigned to the realm of technical improvement, the province of experts and policy elites.

Ten years ago, the provocative formulation of “degrowth”—a so-called “missile concept”—was put forward to challenge this de-politicization of environmentalism and attack the “oxymoron of sustainable development.”<sup>3</sup> The use of a negative word for a positive project was intentional: by subverting the desirability of growth, degrowth aimed to identify and question the ideology that must be confronted in order to transition to a truly sustainable world: the ideology of growth. Degrowth theorists call for an “exit from the economy,” an invitation to abandon economic thinking and construct viable alternatives to capitalism. However, proposing alternative economic models is not enough. We must also question the existence of an autonomous sphere called “the economy.” The “free market” is not a natural process; it has been constructed through deliberate governmental intervention. Re-politicization of the economy will require hard-fought institutional change to return it to democratic control.

## Envisioning Degrowth

Advocates of degrowth refrain from offering any one blueprint to replace today’s growth-centric “free” market. Their objective is to open up conceptual space for imagining and enacting diverse alternative futures that share the aims of downscaling affluent economies and their material flows in a just and equitable manner.<sup>4</sup> Reducing such material flows would likely lead to a decrease in GDP as currently measured.<sup>5</sup> However, degrowth is not synonymous with recession or depression, the terms we use for negative growth in a growth economy. Degrowth, instead, involves a

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rethinking of the organization of society signaled by terms such as limits, care, and *dépense*.<sup>6</sup>

Degrowth proposals generally incorporate collective *limits*, such as caps on carbon emissions or 100% reserve requirements for banks. These are understood as “self-limitations,” collective decisions to refrain from pursuing all that could be pursued. Moreover, only social systems of limited size and complexity can be governed directly rather than by technocratic elites acting on behalf of the populace. Fossil fuels and nuclear power are dangerous not only because they pollute, but also because an energy-intensive society based on increasingly sophisticated technological systems managed by bureaucrats and technocrats will grow less democratic and egalitarian over time. Many degrowth advocates, therefore, oppose even “green” megastructures like high-speed trains or industrial-scale wind farms.

*Care* can become the hallmark of an economy based on reproduction, rather than expansion. Reproduction refers to the activities that sustain the life cycle, typically within the family. But more generally, it encompasses all processes of sustenance and restoration. In the present economy, care work remains gendered, undervalued, and pushed into the shadow of the formal economy. Degrowth calls for the equal distribution of care work and the re-centering of society around it. A caring economy is labor-intensive precisely because human labor is what gives care its value. It thus has the potential to offset rising unemployment today while fostering a more humane society.

*Dépense* refers to the unproductive expenditure of the social surplus. How civilizations allocate their surplus, the expenditures they make above and beyond what is necessary to meet basic human needs, gives them their collective character. The Egyptians devoted their surplus to pyramids, the Tibetans to an idle class of monks, and the Europeans of the Middle Ages to churches. In today’s capitalist civilization, as the surplus is accumulated and invested to produce more growth, *dépense* is displaced to privatized acts of exuberant consumption. Since limiting excessive consumption alone would fuel even more saving and investment, degrowth envisions radically reducing the surplus and deploying it for a festive society in which citizens devise new, non-harmful ways to dispense it, ways that help build community and collective meaning.

## The Degrowth Imperative

There is a substantial body of evidence that demonstrates how growth threatens both environmental and social well-being.<sup>7</sup> Continued economic growth makes us more likely to exceed the safe operating space defined by planetary boundaries, making life harder for everyone, especially the most vulnerable. Although “green growth” has become a buzzword in recent years, it remains an oxymoron. Its emphasis on enhanced efficiency creates a paradox: decreased resource requirements lead to lower costs and so—by the simple workings of supply and demand—a rebound in

the consumption of resources.<sup>8</sup> This is part of the fundamental dynamic of capitalism: increasing productivity frees up resources that are invested to provide yet more growth.

Continued economic growth in wealthy nations is also proving inimical to well-being. As Herman Daly observed, “illth” (congestion, crime, and other undesirable side effects) increases as fast as, or faster than, wealth as measured by GDP.<sup>9</sup> Redistribution, not growth, is what improves well-being in affluent nations. Moreover, despite significant economic growth, people in the United States and most countries of the West are at best only marginally happier than they were in the 1950s. The wealthy are happier than the poor, but wealth, in the aggregate, does not translate into a higher average level of happiness because aspirations also increase and comparisons intensify with higher standards of living. Growth can never quench the desire for positional goods; only redistribution and new values can.

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What about those in poor nations who have yet to see the benefits of growth? Degrowth in the Global North can provide ecological space for the Global South. For example, strong carbon caps for the North and better terms of trade for the South can help compensate for past carbon and resource debts, redistributing wealth between North and South. Economic growth in the South, moreover, threatens alternative, non-monetized means of livelihood, generating the poverty that, in turn, makes more growth “necessary.” Degrowth in the North, then, can provide space for the flourishing of alternative cosmologies and practices in the South, such as *buen vivir* in Latin America or *ubuntu* in Africa. These are alternatives to development, not alternative forms of development.

### Seeds of a Degrowth Transition

Degrowth alternatives have begun to flourish as the formal economy has fallen into crisis. These include food production in urban gardens; co-housing and eco-communes; alternative food networks, producer-consumer cooperatives, and communal kitchens; health care, elder care, and child care cooperatives; open software; and decentralized forms of renewable energy production and distribution. These alternatives are often accompanied, or even supported, by new forms of exchange such as community currencies, barter markets, time banks, financial cooperatives, and ethical banks.<sup>10</sup>

Such projects display various facets of degrowth. They promote a shift to a more locally based economy with short production and consumption cycles. They emphasize reproduction and caring, to satisfy use values, not profits. They replace wage labor with voluntary activity. They do not have a built-in tendency to accumulate and expand, and they are less resource-intensive than their counterparts in the formal economy. Such practices of “commoning” cultivate solidarity and humane interpersonal relations, and generate shared, non-monetary wealth.

## An exit from growth requires an exit from capitalism.

As these alternative forms of provisioning suggest, a degrowth transition will be heavily bottom-up. However, broad institutional changes will be needed to foster adoption of such practices. For example, a guaranteed basic income would provide universal access to national wealth, securing basic sustenance for all and liberating time for non-paid activity. With the complementary policy of a job guarantee, the state could provide employment for all who wish to work in activities that support the common good. A shorter work week and job sharing without a reduction of monthly wages could also combat unemployment and create more time for leisure and commoning. Adoption of these policies would reduce economic insecurity without the need for further economic growth.

A transition beyond growth will entail a transition beyond capitalism, since the essence of capitalism is accumulation and expansion.<sup>11</sup> A degrowth transition would likely follow a pattern similar to those of past systemic economic shifts. Capitalism arose from feudalism as connections were forged between new economic practices and entities (firms, corporations, trade contracts, banks, investments) and political and institutional developments supportive of these practices (abolition of monarchies and feudal privileges, enclosure of the commons, liberal democracy, laws protecting private property).

Analogously, contemporary grassroots practices and institutional changes can seed a transformation of the current system, as economic growth approaches its limits. Degrowthers see deepening democracy as essential to a degrowth transition. They welcome experimentation with direct forms of popular democracy, such as those practiced by the Occupy movement. They envision a regime that combines elements of direct and delegative democracy, such as the “radical ecological democracy” advocated by Ashish Kothari.<sup>12</sup>

A degrowth transition would differ sharply from the revolutions of the twentieth century, not only because it would be resolutely non-violent and democratic in character, but also because the target would not just be capitalism, but also productivism. An exit from growth requires an exit from capitalism, but an exit from capitalism does not necessarily bring an exit from growth. Twentieth century socialist regimes replaced the capitalist relations of production without changing the basic objective of resource exploitation and surplus accumulation for the sake of mass production and consumption.

### Governing Degrowth

Despite the richness of degrowth theory, proponents are still grappling with questions of scale and governance. Advocates of degrowth privilege relocalization, anticipating that it will emerge and flourish, leading to a national political movement that can change the state from within. However, there is a tension between a desire for local autonomy and the need for action at a broader scale. A certain degree of hierarchy is unavoidable because the redistribution of burdens and resources among

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more and less privileged localities will require intermediation and decision-making at broad geographic levels. Some of the degrowth reforms discussed above are, in fact, quite interventionist and would require strong state action.

Likewise, engagement with governance at a global scale is largely absent from the discussions within the degrowth movement. This is curious given the centrality of issues like climate change, free trade, and relentless global competition. Many degrowth advocates appear to assume that limitations on trade and capital at the national level will extricate a country from global economic forces, or that generalized global change will ensue as the aggregate effect of local grassroots initiatives. However, such developments remain unlikely. Climate change, for instance, cannot be tackled solely by summing up various local low-carbon initiatives in the absence of international agreements that cap total greenhouse gas emissions.

Under the prevailing neoliberal regime, global interdependence makes it impossible for a country to undertake a degrowth transition on its own. Doing so would entail substantial penalties from capital flight, bank and currency collapses, asset devaluations, collapse of public and security institutions, and political isolation. This would undermine the ability of a nation to pursue a quiet contraction on its own. Likewise, if a single country or block of countries were to successfully downscale their economies, a global reduction of resource prices would likely follow, producing a rebound in consumption elsewhere. In a sense, then, escaping growth is a global collective action problem. To be successful, the transition to degrowth must be global.

### Epilogue

Degrowth requires a commitment not just to protect nature or to manage and mitigate the impacts of capitalism, but also to create an alternative social-ecology and a fundamentally different basis for action. From this new perspective, environmentalists opposing a mega-project need not perform cost-benefit calculations or devise alternatives that accommodate growth. They can simply assert that such projects do not fit the world in which they want to live. They can say that there is alternative, and it is called “degrowth.”

### Endnotes

1. The phrase is from Ursula Le Guin, whose social science fiction novel *The Dispossessed* (London: Panther, 1975) provides a vivid exposition of a degrowth world.
2. Bruno Latour, “To Modernize or to Ecologize? That’s the Question,” in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, eds. Noel Castree and Bruce Willems-Braun (New York: Routledge, 1998), 221-242.
3. Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009). For a review of the unpublished francophone literature, see Valérie Fournier, “Escaping from the Economy: The Politics of Degrowth,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 28, no. 11/12 (2008): 528-545. The choice of the term “degrowth” (*décroissance* in French) was inspired by the title of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Jacques Grinevald, and Ivo Rens, *Demain la Décroissance: Entropie-écologie-économie* (Lausanne: Pierre-Marcel Favre, 1979). On degrowth as a “hypothesis,” see Giorgos Kallis, Christian Kerschner, and Joan Martinez-Alier, “The Economics of Degrowth,” *Ecological Economics* 84 (2012): 172-180.
4. See Francois Schneider et al., “Crisis or Opportunity? Economic Degrowth for Social Equity and Ecological Sustainability: Introduction to this Special Issue,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 18, no. 6 (2010): 511-518.
5. Herman Daly, *Beyond Growth: the Economics of Sustainable Development*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
6. Giacomo D’Alisa, et al., eds., *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (London: Routledge, 2014); see also [www.vocabulary.degrowth.org](http://www.vocabulary.degrowth.org).



7. See D'Alisa et al., op. cit.; Daly, op. cit.; Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth* (New York: Earthscan, 2008),
8. Blake Alcott, "Jevons' paradox," *Ecological Economics* 54, no. 1 (2005): 9-21.
9. Herman Daly, op. cit.
10. Joana Conill, et al., *Otra vida es posible: prácticas alternativas durante la crisis* (Barcelona: Ediciones UOC Press, 2012); Julie Katherine Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
11. Capitalism can experience involuntary negative growth, but not for long, as this would lead to intensifying inequalities and socio-political instability, and the threat of the imposition of some form of autocracy.
12. Ashish Kothari, "Radical Ecological Democracy: A Path Forward for India and Beyond," *The Great Transition Initiative* (July 2014), available at <http://greattransition.org/publication/radical-ecological-democracy-a-path-forward-for-india-and-beyond>.

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Giorgos Kallis is an ecological economist and political ecologist, and a professor at ICTA, Barcelona. Previously a Marie Curie Fellow at the Energy and Resources Group of UC Berkeley, Giorgos holds also a Ph.D. in Environmental Policy from the University of the Aegean, a Masters in Economics from Universitat Pompeu Fabra, and a Masters in Environmental Engineering and a Bachelors in Chemistry from Imperial College, London. He is the coordinator of the European Network of Political Ecology and editor of the new book *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (2014). His research is motivated by a quest to cross conceptual divides between the social and the natural domains and focuses on the political-economic roots of environmental degradation and its uneven distribution along lines of power, income, and class. His current work engages with the double global economic and ecological crisis, exploring the hypothesis of sustainable degrowth: a smooth economic downscaling to a sustainable future where we can live better with less.

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