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The Case for Degrowth

polity

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Preface

As this book goes to press, in April 2020, the World Health Organization has declared a global pandemic of COVID-19. We write these lines quarantined in our homes in Barcelona and Florida. We are not prophets, so we cannot predict how health and economic crises will have unfolded by the time you read this book. One thing we do know is that the case for degrowth will remain as relevant as ever.


We make a case for attributing current ecological disequilibrium and a range of social ills to the relentless pursuit of growth. It would be naive to claim that this pandemic is proof of limits to growth, a messianic reckoning for our unsustainable ways. Epidemics happened in the past and will happen in the future. Yet the speed and scope of this contagion are clearly driven by interconnectivi-

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ties of accelerated global economies, exemplified in its spread via airplane and ship routes. The growing ease with which viruses jump from animals to humans is conditioned by expansion of corporate agricultural systems, encroachment of humans on habitats, and the commodification of wildlife, all integral to current growth economies.


The failure of some leaders to respond quickly and to protect their populations, as well as urges to restart economies before the pandemic is over, can likewise be understood in the context of ongoing pushes to sustain growth analyzed in this book. One dangerous dimension of these pushes is rejection of scientific evidence and advice. In recent decades, climate change deniers have undermined faith in science among a portion of the public in efforts to defend fossil-fueled growth. Not welcoming scientific findings that threaten growth economies, some governments have cut funding for pandemic research units and epidemic control teams, as well as studies on mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

Several decades of budget cuts to public health and to social and civil security infrastructures, enacted in the name of economic growth, have eroded capacities of many states to respond to this crisis. The pandemic has lain bare the fragility of




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existing economic systems. Wealthy nations have more than enough resources to cover public health and basic needs during a crisis, and could weather declines in non-essential parts of the economy by reallocating work and resources to essential ones. Yet the way current economic systems are organized around constant circulation, any decline in market activity threatens systemic collapse, provoking generalized unemployment and impoverishment. It doesn't have to be this way. To be more resilient to future crises – pandemic, climatic, financial, or political – we need to build systems capable of scaling back production in ways that do not cause loss of livelihood or life.



Some of you might protest, “Isn't the coronavirus crisis revealing the misery of degrowth?” We invite you to first read this book. What is happening during the pandemic is *not* degrowth. The goal of degrowth is to purposefully slow things down in order to minimize harm to humans and earth systems. The current situation is terrible, not because carbon emissions are declining, which is good, but because many lives are lost; it is terrible not because GDPs are going down, to which we are indifferent, but because there are no processes in place to protect livelihoods when growth falters. For us, caring and community solidarity are vital principles




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of degrowth societies, and engines for moving in more equitable and sustainable directions.

We would like to see societies become slower by design, not disaster. This pandemic exemplifies the types of growth-induced disasters we diagnose in this book. The economic policies and social arrangements we propose offer ways to make such situations more livable and just, to emerge stronger and better post-crisis, and to reorient practices and politics that are setting the scene for future disasters.


The end of growth will not necessarily involve a smooth transition. It may very well be unplanned, unwilling, and messy, in conditions not of our own choosing. Conditions like the ones we are living through now. History often evolves with punctuations; our analysis shows how periods of paralysis can reach a tipping point, when unexpected events open new possibilities and violently close others. The COVID-19 pandemic is such an event. Suddenly, things take radical new directions, and the unthinkable becomes thinkable, for better or for worse. Severe economic depression led to Roosevelt's New Deal, and also to Hitler's Third Reich. What are the possibilities and dangers now?

Amid this pandemic, many scientific, political, and moral authorities are communicating the message that caring for people's health and wellbeing




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should come before profit, and that is great. A resurgence of the care ethic that we advocate is evident in the willingness of younger people to stay home to protect their elders, and in the spirit of duty and sacrifice among care and health workers. Of course, many stay home also because they fear the virus and worry about themselves, or to avoid police fines. And many care workers go to work because they must earn a living. But, as we argue, acting collectively against such crises requires combinations of sacrifice and solidarity, self and collective interest, government interventions and popular consensus about the right thing to do.



Deep inequalities are coming into play in new ways. While some have the luxury of sheltering at home, others must choose between unemployment without an adequate safety net and exposure to the coronavirus in jobs involving care work and provisioning. As the pandemic plays out differently in different parts of the world, those who are in more vulnerable identities and positions are likely to suffer more than others. These injustices coexist with an awareness that, unless whole populations are protected, not even the wealthiest are fully safe from contagion.




In this crisis, like others before, people have mobilized and self-organized where businesses and

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governments have failed to provide for their needs – from mutual aid groups delivering food and medicines for elders, to groups of doctors, engineers, and hackers collaborating to 3-D print components for oxygen ventilators, to students babysitting the children of doctors and nurses. The proliferation of caring and commoning endeavors, which form the bedrock of the degrowth societies we envision, are all the more commendable given the contagious nature of the virus. After the pandemic is over, and the difficult path of economic reconstruction starts, this resurgent dynamism of commoning and care will be vital.

Positive impulses among individuals and grassroots networks are necessary but not sufficient for sustained change. We need states to secure safety and healthcare, protect the environment, and provide economic safety nets. The policies we advocate in this book were necessary before the pandemic, and are vital during and after: a Green New Deal and public investment program, work-sharing, a basic care income, universal public services, and support of community economies. So is the reorganization of public finance through measures including carbon fees and taxes on wealth, high incomes, natural resource use, and pollution. Whereas our book focuses on demobilizing resource-intensive and




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ecologically damaging aspects of current economies, pandemic responses deal with demobilizing those aspects not immediately essential for sustaining life. We coincide in facing the fundamental challenge of managing political economies without growth during and after the pandemic: how to demobilize parts of the capitalist economy while securing the provisioning of basic goods and services, experimenting with resource-light ways of enjoying ourselves, and finding positive meanings in life.



Radical proposals are already being considered and selectively adopted across the political spectrum as they provide concrete solutions amid the pandemic. Companies and governments have reduced working hours and implemented work-sharing; different forms of basic income are being debated; financial measures have been instituted to subsidize workers in the quarantine period and after businesses close; an international campaign for care income has been launched; governments have engaged the productive apparatus to secure vital supplies and services; and moratoriums are being considered or imposed on rent, mortgage, and debt payments. There is growing understanding that vast government spending will be required.




Our book suggests ways we can reconstruct economies with the goal of mitigating crises that loom

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on the horizon, including a wide array of threats associated with climate change. This goal will not be met by subsidizing fossil fuel companies, airlines, cruise ships, and tourism mega-businesses. Instead, states need to finance Green New Deals and rebuild their health and care infrastructures, creating jobs in a just transition to economies that are less environmentally damaging. As oil prices fall, fossil fuels should be taxed heavily, raising funds to support green and social investments, and to provide tax breaks and dividends to working people. Rather than using public money to bail out corporations and banks, we urge the establishment of basic care incomes that will help people and communities to reconstruct their lives and livelihoods.

The world will change after the virus, and there will be struggles over which paths to take. People will have to fight to direct change toward more equitable and resilient societies that have gentler impacts on humans and natural environments. Powerful actors will try to reconstitute status quo arrangements, and to shift costs to those with less power. It takes organizing and a confluence of alliances and circumstances to ensure that it won't be the environment and the workers who pay the bill, but those who profited most from the growth that preceded this disaster.




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This crisis arguably opens up more dangers than it does possibilities. We worry about the politics of fear that the coronavirus pandemic engenders, the intensification of surveillance and control of peoples' movements, xenophobia and blame of others, as well as home isolation that curbs coming and political organizing. Once measures such as curfews, quarantines, rule-by-decree, border controls, or election postponements are taken, they can become part of the arsenal of political possibility, opening dystopian horizons.



To counter these risks, this book motivates and guides us to re-found societies on the commons of mutual aid and care, orienting collective pursuits away from growth and toward wellbeing and equity. These are not just lofty aspirations; we identify everyday practices and concrete policies to start building the world we want today, together with political strategies to support synergy among these efforts in the construction of equitable and low-impact societies.



When we were writing this book, we knew we would have to work hard to convince readers of the case for degrowth. Our job may be somewhat easier now amid such tangible evidence that the current system is crumbling under its own weight. As we embark on the second major global economic crisis



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in a dozen years, perhaps some of us will be more willing to question the wisdom of producing and consuming more and more, just to keep the system going. The time is ripe for us to refocus on what really matters: not GDP, but the health and well-being of our people and our planet.

In a word, degrowth.

Acknowledgments

For years now, the four of us have been writing about the negative impacts and disastrous futures of economic growth, while urging moves toward healthier horizons. This is the first book we dedicate to alternative paths forward. An organized transition to degrowth will be politically difficult, but we believe that it is possible, and that living and working toward that transition is good in itself.

Writing this book is an act of care. Care for family, friends, and fellow citizens striving to contribute and find meaning in the face of historic challenges. Care for people and places around the world struggling to survive the burdens and damages of growth. And care for each other, as collaborators and co-authors.

As in any act of care, our efforts to produce this book ran up against limits and vulnerabilities of our individual positions – class, gender, disciplinary, cul-

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tural, and other. Together we have worked toward new understandings and acceptance. Convinced that meaningful and rewarding journeys are rarely the easiest ones, we hope that this book motivates and empowers differently positioned readers on their own challenging paths.

Giorgos Kallis is an ICREA professor at ICTA-UAB, where he teaches ecological economics and political ecology. He has studied how water has been mobilized to fuel the growth of cities and has devoted recent years to arguing against the folly of green growth. Giorgos's latest work is a defense of the notion of limits.

Susan Paulson, based at the University of Florida, studies and teaches about gender, class, and ethnoracial systems interacting with bodies and environments. She has researched and taught in Latin America for thirty years, fifteen of those living in South America among low-income, low-impact communities. Susan is currently studying changing masculinities among men who perform painful and dangerous labor in extractive industries.

Giacomo D'Alisa is based at CES-UC in Coimbra, Portugal, where he researches commons and commoning, arguing that a society that prospers without growth must be based around the commons. Giacomo has written about conflicts over

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waste in his native Campania, and about political strategies for degrowth, warning against discourses of “emergency.”

Federico Demaria is a lecturer in ecological economics and political ecology at the University of Barcelona, part of the Environmental Justice Atlas team that studies and maps environmental conflicts and injustices around the world. Federico has lived and worked with waste-pickers in Delhi, studying how environmentalisms of the poor can inform a pluriverse of alternatives to development.

In the collaborative production of this book, each of us contributed theoretical perspectives, contents, and critiques. Giorgos took the lead in bringing these together, conceptualizing the book, laying out its arguments, and writing first drafts of the chapters. The text you have in your hands, however, is the product of Susan’s labor, writing, and rewriting each passage. Her language, approach, and anthropologist’s attention to historical, cultural, and geographical context marks our difference from previous publications on degrowth dominated by economic or environmental arguments. Giacomo’s philosophy of life and politics is responsible for rooting our argument in the commons, and for the political strategy that permeates our case, a strategy of building common senses slowly through

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deep cultural changes that are embodied and practiced. Federico brought experiences of dialogue with allied movements, and conducted research in Barcelona used to illustrate our arguments.

It has not been easy to navigate among four histories of thought and action. We debated heatedly about ways to honor, connect with, critique, or condemn a variety of positions and paths. Our constructive struggles may prefigure wider debates and tensions that we aim to impel among readers.

The understandings expressed in this book have developed through engagement with overlapping networks of scientists and activists, including colleagues and students at ICTA-UAB, Research & Degrowth, the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, the Ecology and Society group at CES, and the Entitle and Political Ecology Networks, as well as the participants of the international degrowth conferences and summer schools.

Let us also acknowledge critics of degrowth, past and future. We are grateful to those who care deeply enough to raise sharp questions and critiques, and to impel the continual clarification and adaptation of our understandings and proposals.

We are grateful to our editors Louise Knight and Inès Boxman, who have been at the heart of this book project since its conceptualization, and

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As co-authors, we take responsibility for all gaps, errors, and inconsistencies in this book, with the hope that our limitations will spark future efforts. We offer the book as an invitation to explore strategies for social-ecological transformation, starting with ways of seeing, being, and interrelating. And we invite you to engage, learn more, and contribute to the conversation.