

Exploring Degrowth

Exploring Degrowth A Critical Guide

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Foreword by Jason Hickel

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Exploring 'Degrowth'

Protests erupted around the world in the 1960s and 1970s to highlight international civil rights, anti-war, feminist, gay liberation and student concerns along with a range of environmental and anti-consumerist issues. Protesters yelled 'NO!' – no to sending young soldiers to Vietnam, no to nuclear weapons, no to lower wages for women, no to laws against homosexuality, no to developments destroying pristine nature, no to chemical pollution of air and waters, no to universities closed to the disadvantaged. Unemployment rose as young people rejected work in dangerous and anti-social industries and institutions. An 'underground', anti-systemic movement attracted them either to the countryside – to establish alternative forms of self-provisioning – or to squat in the cities.

Simultaneously a culture of revolt became rife. Urban streets were riddled with graffiti and posters. Theatres were enlivened with spectacular, seditious and unconventional performances flouting post-war norms. Bookshops and cinemas became sources of 'banned' materials until censorship weakened and gave in. Journalism and writing evolved novel forms of creative non-fiction, discontinuous narrative and performance poetry. The young stepped out in direct actions hailing new forms of citizenship and

relationships. Non-hierarchical organising and networking evolved new politicking that endured and morphed with new media technologies.

As all kinds of movements proliferated, changes in laws, policies and everyday culture ensued. Consequently, progress was made on many socio-political and cultural fronts, yet the world's ecological challenges and social inequities have deepened and expanded. Climate change is just the tip of the environmental-crises iceberg. The first couple of decades of the twentieth century have brought severe biodiversity loss and planetary apocalypse to everyone's lips. These existential challenges have been met by competing solutions such as green and circular economies, ecosocialism, other sustainability 'fixes' and universal sustainable development goals.

It is in this context of heightened debate and widespread dismay that the degrowth movement sprang to life in Europe and spread further afield. The term '*décroissance*', later translated into 'degrowth' in English, began as a provocative slogan used by activists in the early 2000s. The French political scientist and editor Paul Ariès has referred to degrowth as a 'missile word', intentionally making people question the 'growth is good and more growth better' flag under which all nations seemed to have united in economic terms.¹

In strict translations of '*décroissance*', going beyond growth means reducing or decreasing. Proponents focus on reducing environmental use and abuse, yet degrowth is, at once, both a qualitative and a quantitative concept. The qualitative dimension is captured in concepts such as 'frugal abundance', which connects 'conviviality' – enjoying one another's company and acting in solidarity

– with valuing the richness of simplicity as in ‘small is beautiful’.² Beyond significant misunderstandings arising externally, degrowth has developed multiple meanings and nuances within the activist movement campaigning for it.

Most significantly, the word ‘degrowth’ has misled to the extent that its prefix and association with words such as *decline* and *diminish* seem to indicate that *degrowth* means austerity, puritanism and even poverty. The minimalist simple-living aspect of degrowth seems to confirm such suspicions. Especially since the global financial crisis broke during 2007–8, with persisting consequences, degrowth sounds unsettling. In contrast, degrowth theorists and activists see degrowth as establishing secure and safe lives, fulfilling everyone’s needs in collaborative and collective ways, as celebratory and convivial.

The degrowth principle of living within Earth’s regenerative limits in socially equitable and collectively supportive ways addresses both global and environmental crises. This book is intended as an introduction to degrowth for anyone unfamiliar with the movement. Equally, it is written for those who are familiar with degrowth but would like a handy *résumé* on what the movement stands for, what it has achieved and where it might go in the 2020s. It will explain the intended meanings of degrowth for its protagonists and advocates, who have realised certain degrowth ideas and principles in mini-experiments with collective living, working collaboratively and self-governing using consensual decision-making. Chapters focus on various aspects of degrowth in action. Activists are mobilised by theories and visions, and propose policies for immediate

implementation as well as establishing degrowth in stages and holistically, that is, a degrowth project.

CHALLENGING GROWTH

Challenging economic growth as a concept or ideal is neither novel nor extraordinary. However, recent critics of growth, such as the late democratic socialist Erik Olin Wright, tend to counsel market-based reforms rather than a revolutionary response aimed at minimising ‘stuff’ produced. Many critics of growth adopt a preference for the term ‘development’. Consequently, development has become ‘a word for all seasons’, meaning whatever growth critics want it to mean in the circumstances, with different types of emphases on qualitatively improving the conditions of living for the majority who currently live more precariously and powerlessly than the elite few with wealth and political influence.

A reformist Western concept and practice, the whole idea of development has been rebutted in ways aligned with degrowth thinking, focusing on decolonisation and liberating imaginaries, since the 1980s in a radical ‘post-development’ critique.³ Meanwhile, capitalism has grown extensively and intensively, invading new territories, new sectors and creating its very own context for growth in patents and copyrights for novel technologies, in short an information ‘territory’ within which to expand assets. So it is clear that calls for keeping capitalism on the more qualitative tracks of development consistently failed.

The nineteenth-century revolutionary Karl Marx’s *Capital* (vol. I, 1887 [German, 1867]) has been the out-

standing reference for theorists pondering the anomalies of a politico-economic system forever spiralling upwards in monetary terms, imperially expansive in its impulses and aimed at making profits for the few. Yet those who established communist regimes in the twentieth century, ostensibly to change the world according to Marx – who would have been horrified at the results – just seemed to produce another version of inequity and, significantly, economies based on productivist notions of growth.

Since the global financial crisis the most humane journalists and left-minded politicians have tended to focus on managing growth following development principles of more just distribution, at least in the ‘good times’. Still, when economies turn bad, the state has been just as likely to resort to seemingly necessary austerity. In stark contrast, on the streets, in underground cultures and oppositional media, anti-capitalist demands to occupy (potentially everything) and calls for ‘system change not climate change’ have become rampant. In this context, it is no surprise that an explicitly anti-growth, indeed de-growth, movement would gain attraction.

In terms of the flagrant abuse of planet Earth, we know that capitalist production and trade has increasingly outstripped its regenerative capacity for the last 50 years. By 2019 this meant exploiting natural resources as if there were 1.7 Earths.⁴ Much over-consumption has occurred in the Global North – where the degrowth movement started and maintains its greatest support – in Europe. Environmental crises are inextricably linked to economies harnessed to growth. Initial responses to degrowth and debates around the concept tend to confirm the

extent to which our minds, our imaginaries (not simply our everyday practices) have been colonised by the idea of growth. It is as if economies without growth are impossible to imagine. Even to mention degrowth in mainstream everyday situations seems idiotic and illogical, at least until one learns its nuances, foundations and intents.

By way of one significant example, unions are structurally oriented to increasing the size of the capitalist pie, not only their slice of it. Mainstream workers and unionists most strongly identify as a class apart and opposed to capitalists and managers with their primary goal as a fairer distribution of output. Even if unions have gone on strike in environmental protests, the holistic idea of degrowth challenges their everyday struggles to maintain full employment and to gain higher wages and salaries. Indeed, the degrowth movement evolved to expose this entrenched omnipotence of the concept, practice and quasi-theology of growth. As Kenneth Boulding said: ‘anyone who believes in indefinite growth in anything physical, on a physically finite planet, is either mad – or an economist.’⁵

Yet progressive and forward-thinking unions have strong campaign synergies with degrowth when they institute ‘just transition’ programmes for workers, move into developing arrangements for sharing work, prioritise improving the terms and conditions for part-time workers and have long-range plans for progressively shortening the average working week. Even as degrowth hits a brick wall with conventional structures and institutions, chapter 3 will show how many values and visions degrowth shares with various twenty-first-century movements such as ecofeminism, Occupy and municipalism, and with associ-

ated principles, such as autonomy, conviviality and frugal abundance.

Moreover, the rest of the book shows how degrowth action and theories have developed, cultural distinctions in degrowth's evolution in various spaces, and political controversies at the heart of the movement. As an entrée, this chapter gives an introductory tour, starting from the French political and intellectual debates that founded degrowth through to its translation into other languages, including English, that duplicated misunderstandings and led to subtle reinterpretations. How has this missile word been used? What are its drivers and its limits? And, why do debates still abound over the relevance and appropriateness of degrowth?

BIRTH OF A PROVOCATIVE SLOGAN

Degrowth was coined as a mere notion, but with the clear intent of reversing growth, in 1972, when sociologist and journalist André Gorz contributed to a debate organised by the Club du Nouvel Observateur in Paris. Gorz asked a profound question with respect to the just published and later highly influential Meadows report *The Limits to Growth*.⁶ Was 'global equilibrium', he asked, 'compatible with the survival of the (capitalist) system?' given that Earth's balance required 'no-growth – or even degrowth – of material production'.⁷

Later in the 1970s, 'degrowth' was used several times, and mainly as a direct translation of 'decline', as in Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's work on natural degradation in *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (1971). So, in 1979,

when Jacques Grinevald and Ivo Rens translated four of Georgescu-Roegen's essays into English, they agreed to use 'degrowth' in translating the title *Demain la Décroissance: Entropie – Écologie – Économie* into *Tomorrow Degrowth: Entropy – Ecology – Economy*.⁸ Subsequently, in the 1980s and 1990s, 'degrowth' appeared from time to time at conferences and in publications but most of the time as a synonym for 'decline', such as in the monthly magazine *S!lence* in a 1993 special issue on Georgescu-Roegen that was edited by Grinevald. As such, the word was really only used occasionally. Although used with great precision and intent, the response was hardly fireworks. However, at the beginning of the 2000s, all of this changed.

An Adbuster activist group in Lyon who feared the greenwashing and re-appropriation of the concept of 'sustainable development' by the capitalist system read Georgescu-Roegen and realised that '*décroissance*' might be a powerful semantic tool to radically question the limits of growth. That same year, in 2001, a group of intellectuals published on such themes in a special issue of the periodical *L'Écologiste: Unmake Development, Remake the World!*⁹ This was followed by a colloquium of the same name, from 28 February to 3 March 2002, at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, organised by La Ligne d'Horizon.¹⁰ Consequently, these two groups got together to collaborate on a 2002 special issue of *S!lence*, a special issue that they called *Décroissance Soutenable et Conviviale – Sustainable and Convivial Degrowth*.¹¹

Even if their first understanding of 'degrowth' was in response to Georgescu-Roegen's work and the need to

decrease, to radically reduce, production and consumption, Adbuster activists Bruno Clémentin and Vincent Cheynet immediately saw in '*décroissance soutenable*' (sustainable degrowth) an alternative slogan to '*développement durable*' (sustainable development). Vincent Cheynet had been a marketing project manager with a keen eye for attention-grabbing slogans. Now the skills of promoting commodities for sale would be turned on their head in an effort which was anti-consumptionist and, indeed, more along the lines of de commodification. Meanwhile, members of the more academic and intellectual group were exploring the anthropological and cultural limits to growth, rapidly adding new dimensions to the emerging idea of degrowth.

The *Silence* special issue included a contribution by degrowth pioneer Serge Latouche 'A bas le développement durable! Vive la décroissance conviviale!' ('Down with sustainable development! Long live convivial degrowth!'). Here, very clearly, the degrowth attack on growth was explicitly undermining the reformist concept of light-green 'development' and highlighted its anti-systemic direction. Latouche wrote: 'To survive or endure, it is urgent to organise *décroissance* ... it is not enough to moderate current trends, we must squarely escape development and economism.' Degrowth became a political force: 'Enacting *décroissance* means, in other words, to abandon the economic imaginary, that is the belief that more equals better.'¹²

In short, *décroissance* was a slogan born of radical anti-system critics who wanted to alert the world to the physical limits of growth and to question both the meaning of life and the imperialist dimensions of develop-

ment. So much so that Gilbert Rist, author of *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (1996), would write of ‘degrowth’ that ‘this neologism, was indeed an effective and genuine marketing coup which could have only be made by real professionals, even if we are all conscious about the ambiguity behind the term.’¹³

AN EFFECTIVE SEMANTIC TOOL?

A semantic tool enabling us to explode the concept and centrality of economic growth and question growth-associated addictions, ‘degrowth’ now became a tool for inviting in-depth debates on the unsustainability of infinite growth on a finite planet and to question whether growth was ever desirable. Even if criticising growth is not new, and its sabotage has been driven by others as well as degrowth advocates, ‘growth’ remains the dominant concept and simplistic, quasi-religious belief, in capitalist societies.

Growth is an omnipotent solution to all our problems – even, perversely, those problems that growth has caused – from unemployment to rising inequalities, from economic crises and public debt to environmental crises, energy scarcity and even starvation. Mainstream politicians, journalists, commentators and academics hail growth or its veritable namesake ‘development’ while the main goal of degrowth advocates is to attack the belief that more means better. In fact, Latouche has argued that we should speak about *a-growth*, in the same way as we speak about atheism, for it is a liberation from this belief of ‘always more’.