



The post-growth economy needs a degrowth vocabulary!

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review of

D'Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (2015) *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era*. London: Routledge. (PB, pp. 220, £24.99, ISBN 9781138000773)

Unless we realize that the present market society, structured around the brutally competitive imperative of 'grow or die', is a thoroughly impersonal, self-operating mechanism, we will falsely tend to blame technology as such or population growth as such for environmental [and social] problems. We will ignore their root causes, such as trade for profit, industrial expansion, and the identification of 'progress' with corporate self-interest. In short, we will tend to focus on the symptoms of a grim social pathology rather than on the pathology itself, and our efforts will be directed toward limited goals whose attainment is more cosmetic than curative.

Murray Bookchin (2005/1993: 463)

Introduction

The so-called developed economies have been facing low growth rates for quite some time now. The previously 'emerging' giants such as the BRICS countries are also not sky-rocketing anymore. Though economists and politicians are still on a quest for magic strategies that would boost economic growth, it is likely that we are entering a post-growth era. 'What would a post-growth economy look like?' is one of the overarching questions of this special issue and indeed a very timely one. *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era* indicates a promising direction

that can be strengthened by building alliances with critical schools of thought, as I will argue in this review.

Within academic discussion, several terms have been used to highlight potential directions for the new era, such as steady state, circular or green economies. However, all of them run the risk that life in post-growth societies will still be geared towards growth. This is exactly what degrowth avoids, despite the critiques that the term keeps facing. It unequivocally stresses that (the mindless striving for) economic growth is itself a problem and urges the societies to move away from the imaginaries of growth. Degrowth highlights that growth is not only not occurring, but is also undesirable, coming at high costs. It may be broadly described as an umbrella term for critiques of the centrality of economic growth in our societies, as well as for alternatives to organising them in socially just and ecologically sustainable ways [see also the ‘Introduction’¹].

Degrowth critiques economic growth as a core economic and societal objective, as well as productivism and consumerism that drive it, stressing three key problems with this state of things. First, economic growth comes with ecological degradation while the possibility of decoupling is a myth. Second, social injustices are inherent to a system organised around growth, with exploitation of the Global South by the Global North being an important pillar of the current economic system. Finally, whilst growth does not necessarily bring good life even to the more privileged people in the society, there is an imperative for everyone’s lives and subjectivities to work for the economy. Degrowthers argue for organising societies in a way that would allow for multiple ways of being within the overarching goals of social justice, ecological sustainability and human flourishing.

Bringing idea(l)s to life

Critiques of growth started appearing already in the 1970s (e.g. Meadows et al., 1972), which is also when the term ‘decroissance’ (French for ‘degrowth’) was coined by André Gorz. However, it is after the turn of the millennium that degrowth gained a momentum in international academic and activist circles. Today, degrowth is a burgeoning multidisciplinary research area and arguably a social movement too (Demaria et al., 2013). In particular, the discussions among ecological economists at the Research & Degrowth group in Barcelona were brought to the field of Ecological Economics and then the world via international

1 This refers to the introduction of the book, titled ‘Introduction: degrowth’. In addition, numbers in square brackets (e.g. [7]) in this review refer to entries in the book (rather than pages).

biennial conferences on degrowth, which have been held since 2008. The present book is also largely the fruit of these discussions.

Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era is the first collection of key debates around degrowth. It has already been translated into ten languages, with all the translations becoming open access one to two years after publication. The audio version of the book, also openly available, is underway as well². With contributions written by more than 50 people from around the world, the *Degrowth vocabulary* is truly a collective effort. The book consists of a preface, an introduction and an epilogue by the editors, and 51 short entries, included into one of the four parts – ‘Lines of thought’, ‘The core’, ‘The action’ and ‘Alliances’. Each entry provides an overview of a particular theme discussed by degrowthers, with suggestions for further readings. The exploration of the book, and degrowth, can start from any of these entries, in an order that fits the reader’s interests. Notably, translations of the book often have additional entries, which communities translating the book have found necessary to include for the context in focus.

The *Degrowth vocabulary* is by no means complete or representing the definitive position on the covered themes. Instead, it articulates key stances of degrowth and provides an important stepping stone for further discussion. The incompatibility of degrowth and capitalism, to which growth is central, is one such stance [see the ‘Introduction’ and 10], which has become more explicit in degrowth debates since the publication of the book. The very structure of the *Degrowth vocabulary* and the way degrowth is presented imply non-dogmatism and openness to dialogue and cooperation. For example, there are figures that have been particularly influential for degrowthers, such as André Gorz, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen or Serge Latouche, but the contributions to the book draw on a much wider spectrum of thought. The section on ‘Alliances’ positions degrowth as not the only way of seeing the world and demonstrates willingness to have a dialogue with other ideas and groups who engage in similar or related struggles. Critiques of degrowth, unsurprisingly, are also present in the book [e.g. 48, 50].

It seems that the practices surrounding the creation of *Degrowth vocabulary* reveal an effort to align academic practice with the idea(l)s of degrowth, despite severe structural constraints of neoliberal academia. This is to be appreciated in a world where our (academic) lives are often part and parcel of issues we critique and try to challenge.

2 Most of the content is already available here: <https://degrowthaudiobook.wordpress.com>.

Where to now?

Degrowth is sometimes interpreted as a call back to pre-industrial and ‘primitive’ ways of living, which is, of course, a gross misconception that is vividly dismantled in the book. The *Degrowth vocabulary* positions degrowth as offering a variety of contemporary ways of living, which may be inspired by some practices of the past, but by no means idealise them or are confined to them. Small-scale organising and particularly that which is close to the land – such as back-to-the-landers [31], eco-communities [38] and urban gardens [46] – is an important part of degrowth. At the same time, communities not necessarily tied to physical spaces, such as digital commons [36], are also part of the degrowth imaginary. The two are often connected, too, with back-to-the-landers, for example, being among the first to start extensively using digital commons [36]. Cooperatives [34] and commons [14] seem to be the desirable forms of degrowth organising. Notably, organisations close to degrowth thinking already exist and manage to sustain themselves even in crisis-stricken contexts such as Greece (see Chatzidakis, 2013; Kokkinidis, 2015).

Small scale and local level alternatives are the most common examples of organising in tune with degrowth, but the *Degrowth vocabulary* shows that the opportunities are wider and richer, even if still marginal and harder to implement. Degrowth is presented as a bottom-up movement, but action prefiguring sustainable degrowth is shown to be possible at different levels, including in the domains of municipal and state-driven public policy. Proposals such as basic income [32], public money [41] or alternatives to GDP [22] require participation of the state. Though it is clear how challenging it is to have any such propositions implemented in growth-centric public institutions, degrowthers do not shy away from trying to enter this terrain and do not give up the idea of radically transforming it.

Now that the *Degrowth vocabulary* has laid the foundations of degrowth research, what comes next? First, there is scope for further nuanced work building on what is already in the book, and it is the task for us as researchers to take it up. For example, as someone who has been researching work, I find the ideas related to work presented in the book [e.g. 40, 47] helpful and thought-provoking, but not always convincing and deserving more theoretically informed discussion of the concept of work itself (see Chertkovskaya and Stoborod, forthcoming). Second, there is space for bringing more themes into the debate. Who is the subject of degrowth? What would consumption look like in a degrowth society? How does degrowth view technology? What do degrowthers make of the state? How would trade/exchange systems be organised? How will energy be provided? We can infer some directions from the book and some of these issues have been

addressed more since the book's publication, but there is a lot more scope for discussion. For it to be fruitful, a close dialogue is needed with the major critical schools of thought.

Leftists of the world, unite!

Degrowth is an open and living research area, but, unsurprisingly, it is not a social theory in itself. Anarchism, feminism, Marxism and postcolonial theory are such theories with decades or even centuries of history, which continue scrutinising contemporary issues in theoretically advanced ways. This theoretical strength is often not some useless exercise in intellectual argumentation, but provides frameworks for informed and thought-through actions. Indeed, these schools of thought offer not only elaborate theoretical insights, but have been able to mobilise people across the globe in struggles for justice. Degrowth, being already positioned on the left, has been inspired by these perspectives, as the *Degrowth vocabulary* demonstrates.

Degrowth ideals of organising communities, cooperatives and commons, as described in the book, are often in line with anarchist principles of autonomy, non-hierarchy, self-organisation and direct democracy. The *Degrowth vocabulary* draws extensively on Marxism, whether when discussing societal metabolism [6], commodity frontiers [13] or capitalism [10]. Care [11] – one of the central concepts and the most frequently appearing words in the book – stems from feminist thought. Anarcho-feminist stances also inform the degrowthers' position on population growth, which is by no means Malthusian, being for voluntary and 'conscious procreation' and against any top-down population policies [27]. Postcolonial thought seems to be less central to the book, highlighting the northern and European location of most degrowth debates, but it undoubtedly informs related concepts. However, there is much more scope for integrating each of these four critical theories into the degrowth agenda, especially if degrowth positions itself as a movement for global justice (see Chertkovskaya et al., this issue). So postcolonial theory, Marxism, feminism and anarchism – these should be the key lines of thought and allies for degrowth.

The left, however, needs degrowth as well (Kallis, 2015). Degrowth brings together the inseparable issues of social justice, ecological sustainability and human flourishing. It also hugely benefits from being informed by environmental and natural sciences. In other words, as the *Degrowth vocabulary* demonstrates, degrowth engages an impressive combination of, to put it roughly, quantitative and qualitative scholarly work, covering both conceptual and concrete issues. This is exactly what is needed to make it possible for seemingly

utopian ideals to become feasible. Unfortunately, each of the four above-mentioned theoretical traditions has a tendency to get stuck onto itself in attempts to demonstrate how a particular position is more central, important or accurate than others, reproducing a well-rehearsed way of thinking. However, with the problems and injustices our one world (Badiou, 2008) is facing, there is no time or space for divisions and competition between essentially compatible worldviews. Degrowth provides a platform for dialogue and an opportunity to think and act together, without losing ourselves and the issues we think are core. So leftists of the world, unite!

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