

Degrowth - Stories We Should Tell

How do degrowth ideas spread in public discourses?

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Master Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science,
No 2016:007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Lund University
International Master's Programme in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science
(30hp/credits)



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Lund University Centre for
Sustainability Studies



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Submitted May 16, 2016

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Abstract:

Degrowth is an academic concept and activists' niche project in Europe and other early-industrialized parts of the world aiming to reframe the current sustainability challenge of declining environmental and unjust social conditions. Its emphasis is on the radical transformation of the current societal-economic structure in order to achieve inherently sustainable conditions. There are various degrowth approaches that target different levels and spheres of social change.

Discourse is one site of this struggle to achieve social change. Discourses shape and challenge societal conditions and indicate as well as foster social change. In this study, a critical discourse analysis is conducted to analyze the different strands of degrowth framings in the academic discourse and the dispersion of degrowth ideas in the public. The focus of the analysis is on *how* degrowth ideas are represented and perceived. Two discursive areas of the public are considered: the dispersion of degrowth ideas in newspaper articles of the mass media public, and the dispersion of degrowth ideas in social media posts.

The findings from the analysis of the academic discourse suggest that there is neither a shortage of understandings of the sustainability challenge, nor is there a shortage of ideas to solve it. Instead, radical degrowth ideas face some obstacles to unfold their transformative potential because there is a missing part in the communication of degrowth ideas between the academic and public discourse.

Discursive strategies of story-telling and framing in public discourses can empower people to challenge the social order. In the case of the mass media public it is shown that the conventional knowledge transfer of experts to a particular newspaper audience is not very effective to disperse transformative ideas. It has limited reach and does not significantly challenge the social order. The discursive practices of the social media public however develop a higher potential to achieve change because it is reached a broader audience and people get more engaged in the discourse.

Degrowth lacks a handy framing that is supported by story-lines which appeal to the people. The potential of change can be increased by unconventional discursive practices to bring already existing degrowth practices under the umbrella term of degrowth. The gap can be bridged by alliances between academic and public discourses to strengthen the inter-discursive exchange.

Keywords: Degrowth, Sustainability Science, Social Change, Critical Discourse Analysis, Framing, Critical Realism.

Word count: 13 940 words.

Acknowledgements

During the process of writing, I shared my thoughts at many occasional encounters with friends, family, and strangers. Each time, I told a different story. This version of the story now leaves the vagueness of spoken words. Thank you all for listening and inspiring me, it has been a pleasure to share the ideas, challenges and discoveries I had throughout the process.

I would like to thank Turaj for support and supervision, for encouragement and trust. Thank you also for the inspiring lectures and discussions.

Thanks to the researchers, discussants and peers at the degrowth colloquium - it was a fruitful exchange of ideas on pathways to degrowth just at the right time. Thank you, Jakob, for the insights into your area of research.

Thank you, LUMES peers for this great time we had together in Lund - it is an incredible discovery to learn that there are so many people from all over the world who are passionate and committed to the same issues as I am. Studying with you has been an amazing experience.

Back home, in Germany, I want to thank my friends and family to host me at "the Clara 13", to support and delight me with game nights, gardening sessions, bonfires, and other pleasant distractions. Thank you Stefan and Karl, Alex and Sophie.

Of course, I deeply thank Nathan who made it possible for me to study in Sweden while taking care of our kids. Thank you Merit and Elias for being so patient - I'm coming home now.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction	1
1.1 Problem: How to achieve sustainability?	1
1.2 Degrowth as an alternative solution?	2
1.3 Sustainability science and critical research	3
2 Theory and Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis	5
2.1 Research design and scope.....	5
2.2 Distinct approaches for analyzing discourses.....	7
2.3 Fairclough's levels of analysis and tools	9
2.4 Ontology and epistemology	11
3 Analysis I: Academic Discourse	14
3.1 Conceptualizations: academic discourse; 3x3 model of social change.....	14
3.2 Selection of articles: systematic literature review	17
3.3 Reframing problems, drivers and solutions	18
3.4 Reflection and limitations.....	23
4 Analysis II: Public Discourse.....	24
4.1 Conceptualizations: the public; areas of public discourse	24
4.2 Analysis A) Representation of degrowth ideas in mass media news.....	26
4.3 Analysis B) Representation of degrowth ideas in the social media public.....	31
4.4 Reflection and limitations.....	35
5 Final Discussion and Conclusion	37
6 References	41

1 Introduction

1.1 Problem: How to achieve sustainability?

While we have talked about 'Limits to Growth' (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972) for more than 40 years, the environmental impacts are getting worse. Knowledge has accumulated about environmental degradation and climate change, possible solutions have been and are being debated, and even a global consensus emerged to tackle global warming (i.e. the COP21 Paris Agreement 2015). Many books have been published adding more apocalyptic stories to the debate, many treaties and policy programs have been launched, from the local to the global, from businesses, banks, governments, and non-governmental organizations. But the story we are telling us lacks plausibility. It seems that everyone knows by now that something is fundamentally wrong with the path our societies are going but we still do not succeed to lower our impacts. The positive impacts on climate and/or the environment either happen accidentally, as in the case of the financial crisis which reduced the global level of CO₂ emissions and resource use impacts, or those positive effects on climate and the environment simultaneously impacted the marginalized and de-privileged people the hardest, as it is the case for the austerity policies in the European so-called periphery (Greece, Spain, etc.).

These problems can be subsumed as sustainability challenges. Why is it that the more we try to fix the problems of climate change, environmental degradation and global justice, the more it seems that we deepen the effects of the crisis? There are manifold challenges that hinder us to achieve a societal transformation towards sustainable conditions. Sustainability science deals with complex and multidimensional problems which have been described by some as 'wicked problems' (Miller, 2013). The more complex a problem is, the more possible explanations are provided to contest over meaning - because none can definitely be rejected as being wrong (Dryzek, 2013). Many models are developed to explain 'what is out there', and numerous solutions are proposed to tackle a variety of identified causes for a problem. Thus, for wicked problems, rational reasoning and scientific argumentation lose importance because the plausibility of an approach is also based on normative pre-assumptions instead of on facts only (McBeth, Shanahan, Arnell, & Hathaway, 2007). Wicked problems cannot simply be solved by stating facts because the way they are understood is based on multiple knowledge claims and values (Miller, 2013).

We already get into trouble to adequately define sustainability problems, and continue to have difficulties to identify causes. In order to achieve sustainability, most would agree, we need to identify the root causes of unsustainability, and we need measures that effectively tackle the root causes. Well, there are many attempts to define what sustainability is and how to achieve sustainable conditions: the green new deal is aiming for it, as well as the ecological modernization agenda (Dryzek, 2013), and the Sustainable Development Goals. Degrowth scholars such as Asara, Otero, Demaria, and Corbera (2015) claim that their approach is distinct to previous sustainability approaches that aim for reformist or transition pathways because degrowth aims to fundamentally transform societal structures (beyond capitalism).

Degrowth is one of many sustainability approaches. Most of the current sustainability approaches emphasize technological innovations. Degrowth scholars and activists however take a different approach. Degrowth approaches are, in contrast to other sustainability approaches such as green growth or ecological modernization, characterized by their focus on structural changes of socio-economic conditions instead of efficiency improvements and technical solutions. Degrowth researchers argue that technological innovations are necessary but not sufficient to leave the current path of unsustainability, because decoupling of resource use from economic growth is not sufficiently possible (Brown, 2012; Domazet et al., 2014; Hanke & Best, 2013; Hobson, 2013; Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014), and a focus on technology might be misleading because it preserves the status-quo of existing power relations (Unmüßig, Sachs, & Fatheuer, 2012). This is especially the case for corporate arrangements between governments who want to preserve jobs and heavy industries who want to keep producing their (unsustainable) commodities (Unmüßig et al., 2012).

1.2 Degrowth as an alternative solution?

The degrowth concept is already well developed in theory that provides convincing reasons for how to achieve sustainability. Its components and proposed solutions are worth considering. Degrowth researchers aim to solve the tensions between economic growth, social injustice, and environmental degradation, including climate change. They argue that in order to tackle this multiple crisis, our society's structure needs to change towards inherently sustainable modes of functioning.

Degrowth however is a niche topic in the academic and public discourse. Research on degrowth and sustainability is only considered by a small and highly connected group of researchers (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2016). Degrowth is also a project of several activist groups in society who are heterogenic

and far from being mainstream (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2016). So why is it that degrowth ideas have not entered into the mainstream discussion of sustainability?

I presume that a transformative change is needed that bridges the academic project and niche movement of degrowth with mainstream thinking, defined here as ordinary people's understanding and everyday practices with regard to sustainability. Crucial, but so far underestimated, elements of social change are to my mind discourses. Discursive struggles are key to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about how people see the world. They could foster a shift in mindsets which in turn would reshape people's habits and everyday practices. A different view on the nexus of economy, society, and sustainability may also increase people's support for change towards a degrowth society. Kallis (2013), a degrowth scholar, claims that collectively created positive visions of degrowth are crucial to ensure that our societies decide themselves how to achieve environmental and social sustainability.

This thesis investigates how degrowth ideas in academia face obstacles to unfold their transformative potential in society. I focus on the representation of degrowth ideas in form of stories, images, metaphors etc. in the public because these representations reveal how people perceive degrowth ideas. Even though the public discourse is just one aspect of change, it is crucial because ideas in the public empower people to act differently - the way we talk about these issues in public discourses can increase social acceptance for doing things differently.

1.3 Sustainability science and critical research

As a sustainability scientist I aim to work transdisciplinary. This requires my thesis to be comprehensible to academics from other fields as well as for practitioners from non-academic areas, and to be relevant for the solution of a sustainability problem (Miller et al., 2014). However, in this study I do not co-create knowledge in a participatory process.

Sustainability science refers to the politically contested concept of sustainable development, but often it lacks a well-founded normative basis (Schultz, Brand, Kopfmüller, & Ott, 2008). The commonly applied universalist notion of sustainable development, that is based on the attempt "to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future" (Brundtland et al., 1987 Ch. 1, 49), is referred to as a 'thin sustainability' concept (Miller, 2013). As this definition limits deeper discussions, it allows a broad agreement. My attempt is to re-politicize the science and practice of sustainability by drawing on a process-oriented concept. The

concept of degrowth for instance refers to a version of sustainability that allows to guide a political debate (Asara et al., 2015). A commonly shared definition of a sustainable state with a normative core allows us to apply sustainability in many societal fields (Schultz et al., 2008). Otherwise, there is a danger of prolonging the discussion indefinitely without ever achieving sustainable levels. It helps to navigate us towards a just and sustainable future (Schultz et al., 2008).

This thesis's approach is to carry out critical research. Critical research requires politically involved research with an emancipatory claim, that is to contribute to social change. In this thesis, I perceive sustainability issues as inherently social problems (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). My concern is about the role of discourse in the way these problems are produced and reproduced and how, through these discursive practices, power relations are shaped and challenged. To be critical means to de-naturalize explanations that we take for granted (Foucault, 1997). In critical research one takes the standpoint of the de-privileged and dominated people within power relations (Richardson, 2007), and identifies those who are responsible and those who have the means to change those existing conditions (Wodak, 2001). Although it may be seen as a shortcoming that I take a moral and political position towards sustainability as an issue of social and environmental justice, I argue that research that takes a neutral and indifferent position to this social problem "contributes to the perpetuation of injustice" (Richardson, 2007, p. 2).

2 Theory and Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse is more than language, it constitutes social conditions. Discourse functions to render certain social practices possible, desirable while others become unthinkable (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002); it legitimates certain actions, builds up hierarchical orders between objects, issues, or persons, and naturalizes certain ideas (Bryman, 2008). Some meanings become, through discourse, privileged while others become marginalized (Bryman, 2008). There are different approaches of discourse analysis and discourse theory wherein critical discourse analysis (CDA) is one particular approach.

2.1 Research design and scope

In this thesis, I want to find out what obstacles degrowth ideas in academia face to unfold their transformative potential in society. Every issue, object or event can be represented in a discursive way by drawing on both, material conditions and experiences and on discursive conditions, e.g. the way it is verbally or visually represented (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The main focus of this thesis is on analyzing the text level, while discursive and non-discursive elements are considered to contextualize the text in its particular conditions within different social areas. The aim is to explore the potential of change of the social order through discursive practices that manifest at the text level.

In the Introduction, I already set the stage of the study: I focus on societies in the 'global North' because degrowth concepts are based on the presumption that a radical transformation towards sustainable conditions of early-industrialized societies definitely is necessary (Ch. 1). In the following section, I will elaborate on different approaches to discourse analysis (2.2), the framework of CDA and the tools I will apply to for the analysis (2.3), and the approach's theoretical premises (2.4).

In this study, I pursue two research tasks (see table 1): I will conduct a CDA for the academic (Ch. 3) and a CDA for the 'public' discourse (Ch. 4) to find out how in both areas, degrowth ideas are discursively represented. Within the academic discourse, I will focus on the analysis of scientific articles about degrowth, in English and German. It will be identified how in those articles, the nexus of society, economy and sustainability is framed from a degrowth perspective (3.3). It also will be shown how degrowth ideas propose to achieve a societal transformation (3.3). The conceptualization of social change is brought into the study in section 3.1. and the method for the selection of academic articles is elaborated on in section 3.2.

The analysis of the public (Ch. 4) is based on a comparative design, where I compare cases from two different discursive areas. Within the public discourse, I distinguish between the newspaper discourse (4.3), and the social media discourse (4.4) to analyze the dispersion and perception of degrowth ideas and practices in the (English and German speaking) public. What the 'public' entails will be elaborated on in section 4.1. All findings will be summarized and discussed in Ch. 5. The research strategy is laid out in table 1.

Table 1. Research Strategy and Research Questions (with reference to the respective sections).

<u>1. Discourse analysis of academic articles to find out:</u>		Section:
RQ 1 A	<i>How does the academic discourse reframes the current sustainability challenge?</i>	3.3
RQ 1 B	<i>What concrete solutions are proposed in academia to foster degrowth?</i>	3.3
<u>2. Discourse analysis of the 'public' of two distinct fields, social media and mass media:</u>		
RQ 2 A	<i>How are degrowth ideas represented and received in the public discourse of mass media (by newspaper authors and their audience)?</i>	4.3
RQ 2 B	<i>How are degrowth projects and practices represented in the public discourse (by encounters and events in social media)?</i>	4.4

To clarify the scope, in this study I do not evaluate the scientific quality of the academic approaches that advocate degrowth although there might be inconsistencies or gaps of degrowth arguments and reasoning. The task of discourse analytic research is to work at the level of texts, images and other sources of discourse to explore *how* a certain issue is represented. It is not about getting 'behind' the discourse to distinguish 'true' or 'false' representations of 'reality' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Neither do I study the material conditions of problems such as climate change, environmental degradation or any problematic socio-economic structure. This study is only concerned with the verbal and visual representations of degrowth ideas in academia and the public, that mirror and challenge material conditions and given structures.

When analyzing discursive struggles of degrowth and investigating how ideas from an academic discourse are disseminated, other discursive fields might also be relevant, e.g. how those ideas are introduced into, received by and transformed within a political discourse. This however had been done already in many other studies (e.g. Baykan, 2007; Becker, Ewringmann, Faber, Petersen, &

Zahrnt, 2015; Soetebeer, 2015; or Spangenberg, 2010). This study focuses on the dissemination of degrowth ideas from the academic discourse into the 'public'.

Other settings, e.g. the role of economic growth orientation and development policies in the global South might also be highly relevant. There are many studies, especially on social movements on environmental and climate justice, covering this aspect.

2.2 Distinct approaches for analyzing discourses

Discourse analysis is not just one approach but rather a combination of approaches to analyze the role of language in the construction of reality. Discourse can broadly be defined as "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1).

Two different approaches will shortly be considered because I find them particularly important for research about how discourses shape and challenge social order and how people understand and act upon an issue. I will distinguish the discourse theoretical approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (see e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 2001 [1985]), from the CDA approach of Norman Fairclough (and Lilie Chouliaraki) (see e.g. Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992, 2013). Although they share key premises about entities such as 'language' and 'subject', each approach has distinctive premises regarding their understanding of 'discourse' or 'social practices' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Both approaches differ in their understanding of the scope of discourse, and their focus of analysis. For Laclau and Mouffe, social reality is completely constituted by discourse, without distinguishing between discursive and non-discursive dimensions, whereas for Fairclough discourse is only partly constitutive while it also is constituted by material conditions (see figure 1 scope of discourse) (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 20). Social conditions, or as Fairclough puts it 'social practices' consist of discursive and non-discursive practices that interact in a dialectical relationship (Richardson, 2007). Thus in CDA, discourse is a concept for texts, speeches, images, and other multimodal sources that is distinct from other social practices such as concrete actions or structures such as institutionalized patterns of regularity (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

The analytical focus often differs as well (see figure 1 analytical focus). The discourse theoretical approach of Laclau and Mouffe maps discourses in a more abstract way. Fairclough's framework on

the other balances a more specific analysis of people's everyday practices of how they actively use discourse to accomplish social actions, with an analysis of the more abstract conditions that limit the people's possibilities for action (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 20).

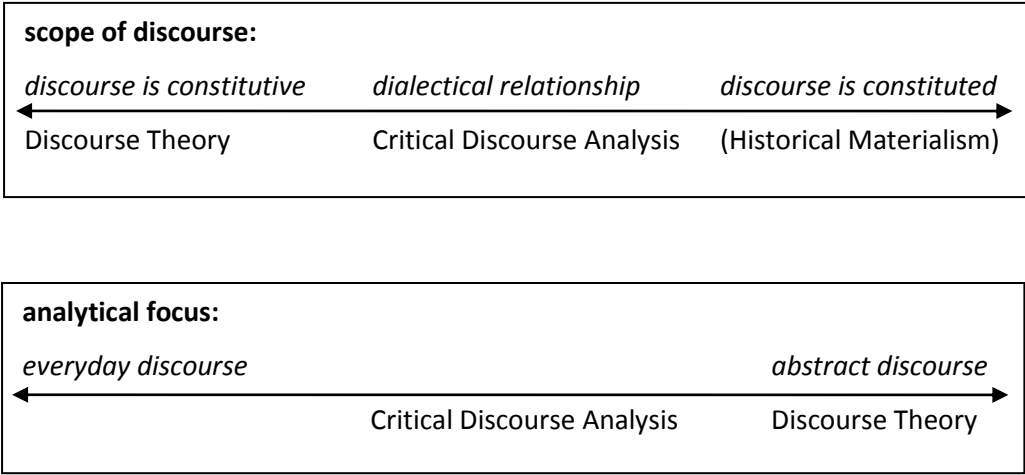


Figure 1. Differing approaches to discourse analysis; adapted and modified figure from Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, p. 20).

The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe takes the clearest post-structuralist position where discourse is a continuous process of struggle over meaning (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). But for this radical view, there are no 'true' facts anymore - only dominating and dominated 'opinions' or versions of representation.

CDA with particular focus on Fairclough's approach on the other hand, which is drawing on Marxist traditions, emphasizes the active role of discourses in the construction of social order whereas it still acknowledges non-discursive forces (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The focus here is to investigate the role of language and discourse as a power source to achieve social *change* (Bryman, 2008).

In this thesis, I will apply the CDA approach. I find it suitable for the purpose of investigating the potential of social change of degrowth discourses. Furthermore, it better fits the ontological premises I have. Since I compare the academic and public discourse to find out how degrowth ideas in academia disseminate into the public, I presume that there are valid arguments for degrowth, based on 'facts', not just worldview and opinion. Thus I partly reject the pure post-structuralist anti-realism claiming that there is no escape from representation.

2.3 Fairclough's levels of analysis and tools

The analysis of a discourse of Fairclough's CDA focuses on three levels: social practice, discursive practice, and text (see figure 2). Each communicative event can be analytically separated into these three dimensions (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The social order is characterized by the material conditions of society in general or a specific field in particular (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discursive practices involve the production and consumption of discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discursive practices have characteristic features for each specific field such as academia, politics, or mass media. At the text level (or other multimodal sources such as images or speeches), the function and character of linguistic and style features is analyzed. It is necessary to always analyze the discursive event in its context of discursive and non-discursive structure:

"No text is ever the text of a single speaker or writer. All texts show traces of differing discourses, contending and struggling for dominance. Texts are therefore the sites of struggle, and in being the sites of struggle, texts are the sites of linguistic and cultural change." (Kress, 1990, p. 32 in Bloor & Bloor, 2013, p. 51).

Social change is mirrored in discursive practices, but discursive practices also actively contribute to social change (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

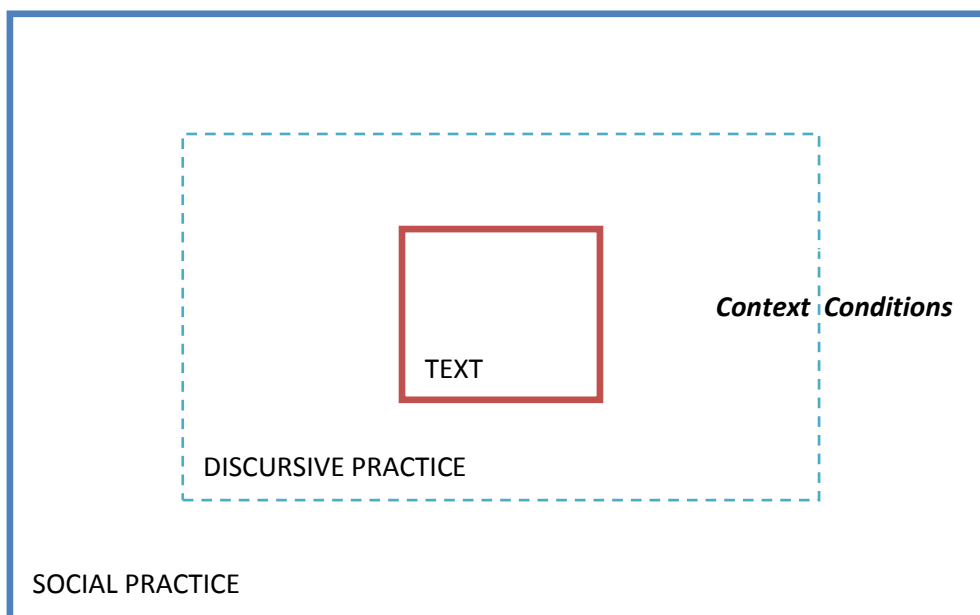


Figure 2. Levels of critical discourse analysis. Adapted from Fairclough (1992, p. 73).

At the text level, it is analyzed how discourses produce and reproduce knowledge, identity, and social relations (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The focus of analysis is on how relations, identities and knowledge claims discursively are developed and thus what their potential to challenge and change the social order is (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Linguistic figures in a text express distinctions that indicate and create identities, clarify social order and hierarchies, and function to indicate and support change (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For instance, chains that position elements in a 'before - after' configuration indicate change, 'us - them' constructions indicate identity building which are often combined with 'good - bad' or 'hero (savior) - villain' story-lines. Verbal constructions of dystopia (scary conditions) vs. visions of utopia (desirable conditions) indicate the desired direction of change, etc. Those distinctions discursively create the potential for new alliances, e.g. against common enemies, they empower people to join together, to act differently, or to question their position in society. Thus, change can be influenced through discursive practices. Another important aspect that determines whether a discourse at the text level develops the potential for change is the relation that is established between active and passive elements i.e. between agents and structures (Machin & Mayr, 2012), thus whether it rather creates a feeling of being empowered and free, or constrained and stuck.

The power of a text, that communicates an idea, can be evaluated by analyzing the framing. Frame analysis can shed light on how arranged information at the text level influences the way people think of an issue (Entman, 1993). Framing is omnipresent which is why it is important to become conscious about how frames are used to express ideas (Lakoff, 2014). A frame consists of more than factual information, it transports ideas through stories and metaphors into the public (Lakoff, 2014). Framing selects certain features and renders certain pieces of information or aspects of an issue more salient than others (Entman, 1993). The function of frames is to provide (1) a problem definition, (2) a cause by identifying the forces that lead to the identified problem, (3) a moral evaluation, and (4) a treatment or solution to the problem (Entman, 1993).

Often, a moral narrative, that is activated through framing, implicitly appoints a hero, a victim, and a challenge or danger (McBeth, Shanahan, & Jones, 2005). Thus, the frame predefines the good and the bad, and it comforts people because the heroes (and allies) of a story as the potential fixers of the problem are empowered to change existing conditions. This will be relevant for the analysis of how degrowth stories, mainly in the public discourse, discursively empower people to act differently.

What we know and take for granted is partly derived from our own experiences, but also from the stories we use to tell about them (Bruner, 1991). Narrative analysis is a tool to investigate how stories operate to construct reality (Bruner, 1991). One important characteristic of stories is that they

empower people to act differently. As the events that occur in a story-line are relevant to the protagonist's beliefs and values, stories provide the basis for interpreting why a person acts the way he or she does (Bruner, 1991). Thus, stories do not provide causal explanations but 'reasons' for things happening (Bruner, 1991). Stories invite their audience to get involved with their imagination and emotions, and to judge the plausibility of a story-line, people do not need to be experts (Davis, 2012). Protagonists of a story act intentionally hence external conditions never fully determine the course of events which in turn implies a certain element of freedom and contingency (Bruner, 1991). Stories rather appeal to understanding than logical reasoning, they also appeal to emotions and imagination, morals and aesthetic perceptions. Stories can strengthen social acceptance because through them, people get involved with an issue, issues can be reframed and social practices redefined. Through framing, abstract ideas can be transformed into embodied knowledge (Lakoff, 2012). Embodied knowledge occurs on a level at which people sympathize with ideas and concepts (Lakoff, 2012).

It is a sign for social change when a text draws on discursive practices from other fields or is creative in its use of style (with regard to the discursive field where it is situated) (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For example, when there are new relationships established between the author and the audience, or when new words from a different field are introduced into another context. In case that there are different understandings of an issue presented within the interplay of discourses, it can be analyzed what consequences it had when one understanding is favored over others (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

2.4 Ontology and epistemology

Methods and theory of discourse analysis are intertwined, thus there are certain ontological and epistemological premises that the researcher must accept (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Discourse analysis is one of the most widely used approaches to social constructivism (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Social constructivism is critical about our taken-for-granted knowledge: it is presumed that reality is only accessible through (mental) categorizations (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Knowledge is hence rather a representation of the way we categorize the world than an objective truth (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Knowledge and worldview are context specific. They are inherently contingent and can change over time (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This anti-essentialist position acknowledges that knowledge is

created through social processes in which we discursively form common truths (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Different perspectives compete to shape the mainstream understanding. Social action is shaped by the taken-for-granted perceptions of reality, defining what and what not is normal (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). People can act accordingly thus reproducing the social order, or they can resist by unconventional or subversive action. Even though knowledge and identities are principally contingent, in a given situation they are relatively inflexible because they are bound by rules and habits (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

CDA however combines a social constructivist approach with a critical realist understanding. Although discourse analysis is often associated with a post-structuralist understanding, it is not per se 'anti-realist' (Bryman, 2008). CDA approaches acknowledge that our understanding of the world is socially constructed through discourse, but that there also are influential material conditions such as physical constraints and forces (Fairclough, 1992). Social configurations and problems are not entirely determined by these pre-conditions, but they also influence them. In my thesis, meanwhile I acknowledge the material reality e.g. of climate change, environmental degradation, and poverty - I emphasize the social character of the sustainability challenges that we face, such as the social construction of our socio-economic conditions, including societal decisions about how we do want to live together, who has the power to decide and which problems we perceive to be the most urgent to tackle. Only because I acknowledge that discourse is an important element for how we define and perceive an issue, it does not mean that there is nothing real anymore. It might be a trap to perceive every issue as a 'viewpoint' only - a prime example is the persistent and influential position of climate change deniers (Dryzek, 2013; Latour, 2004).

Discourse analytical approaches are based on structuralist and post-structuralist premises. Both claim that our access to 'what is real' is through language (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). It is not denied that there is a pre-existing reality consisting of physical objects, events etc. but the idea is that those objects or events only gain meaning through discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). While in structuralism (e.g. De Saussure, 2011 [1916]) it is claimed that we can understand reality by analyzing a web of signs in language that mirror reality and attain meaning through their differences, post-structuralist thinkers (e.g. Derrida, 1993; Foucault, 1973) reject the idea that language mirrors naturally given categories of reality. Post-structuralists instead claim that although signs still acquire meaning through differentiation to other signs, they only exist in relation to each other, and are arbitrarily related to reality (Derrida, 1993). Thus the 'play of differences' constitutes reality in itself (Derrida, 1993), and settles taken-for-granted understandings through continuous reproduction.

The particular understanding of CDA however, by drawing on critical realism and in tension with purely post-structuralist approaches, acknowledges that there are structural (material) constraints that in any given situation are taken for granted (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

A particular element of critical research is that, in contrast to post-structuralist approaches, one can judge between discourses and dismantle ideologies based on critical reasoning. However, it is not always clear where to draw the line. Fairclough, for example, in some cases assumes that the economy is given (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this thesis, I adhere to the understanding that theoretically, every social order could be questioned and dissolved in instability, but in reality there are always structural constraints that keep it more or less stable. I take the social order partly as given, while I believe that many aspects could be questioned through critical reflection.

3 Analysis I: Academic Discourse

The facts discovered by scientists and models developed in academic discourses provide relevant framings and solutions for anyone else. Thus I will analyze the academic degrowth discourse to provide an overview of degrowth ideas. How those scientifically reliable and accountable concepts are perceived in the public discourse will be analyzed in the next chapter (Ch. 4).

3.1 Conceptualizations: academic discourse; 3x3 model of social change

The focus of analysis is on how degrowth ideas are framed in the academic discourse with particular emphasis on the different degrowth approaches' assumption about how to achieve change. To give an overview of what levels and spheres of change can be targeted by degrowth solutions, I develop a model of change. But first, as a part of CDA, I contextualize the academic discourse in the 3-D model (see figure 3).

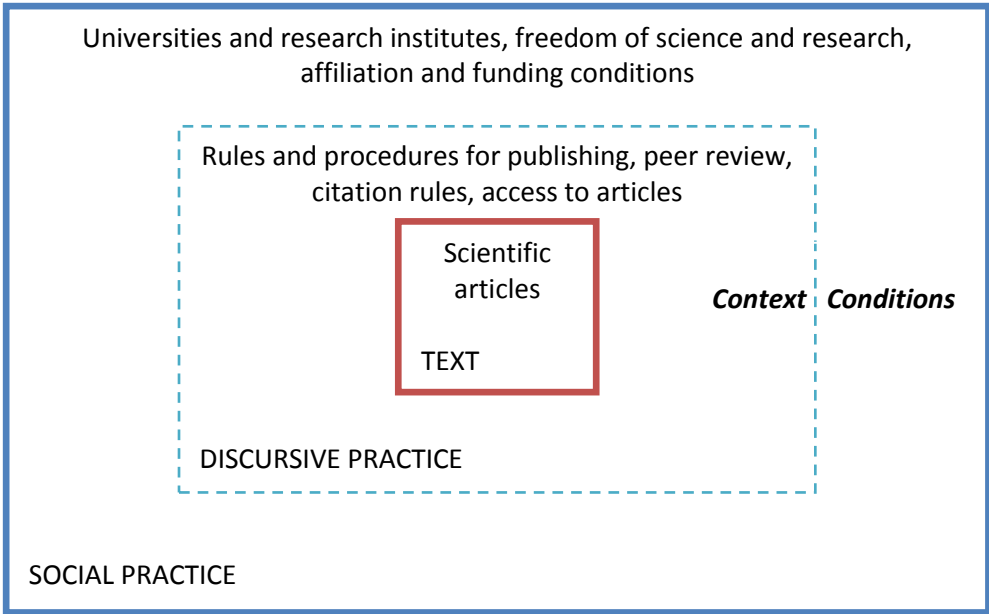


Figure 3. Discourse levels for academic articles (text level), with their particular rules and practices of writing and reading (discursive practices), with the social conditions of the field of academia (social practices). Adapted version of figure 2.

Discursive practices in academia are mainly characterized by written expert-to-expert discourses (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). There are also (mainly one-sided) discursive practices where scientific issues were brought into public discourses (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). In academic discourse, it can be seen how language use is adopted through social pressure (Bloor & Bloor, 2013). A researcher as an author of an academic article has to play by the rules if he or she wants to be acknowledged by a scientific

community. In order to achieve that, manifold formalities and meticulous procedures have to be considered. Main features of academic discourse are for example specialist vocabulary and a use of grammar that requires the writing of long nouns instead of verbs (Bloor & Bloor, 2013).

The models framing and explaining an issue that are developed in academia are relevant for the public. This is because the strength of academia is that researchers uncover taken-for-granted assumptions about our world through systematic reflection. Analytical categories are applied to deconstruct the complexity of the real world, and models are developed that represent reality to help us to make sense of it in a way that emphasizes certain aspects:

"We tend to think of science as a set of truth about the nature of the world, but, in fact, science might be better described as a set of models constructed by people who have carefully observed and studied the world" (Bloor & Bloor, 2013, p. 60).

This is why the analysis of the representation of degrowth ideas in the public in this study is based on the framing in the academic discourse. Before I present the academic degrowth discourse, I introduce a 3x3 model of social change to better understand where the different degrowth approaches see potential to change existing conditions (see figure 4).

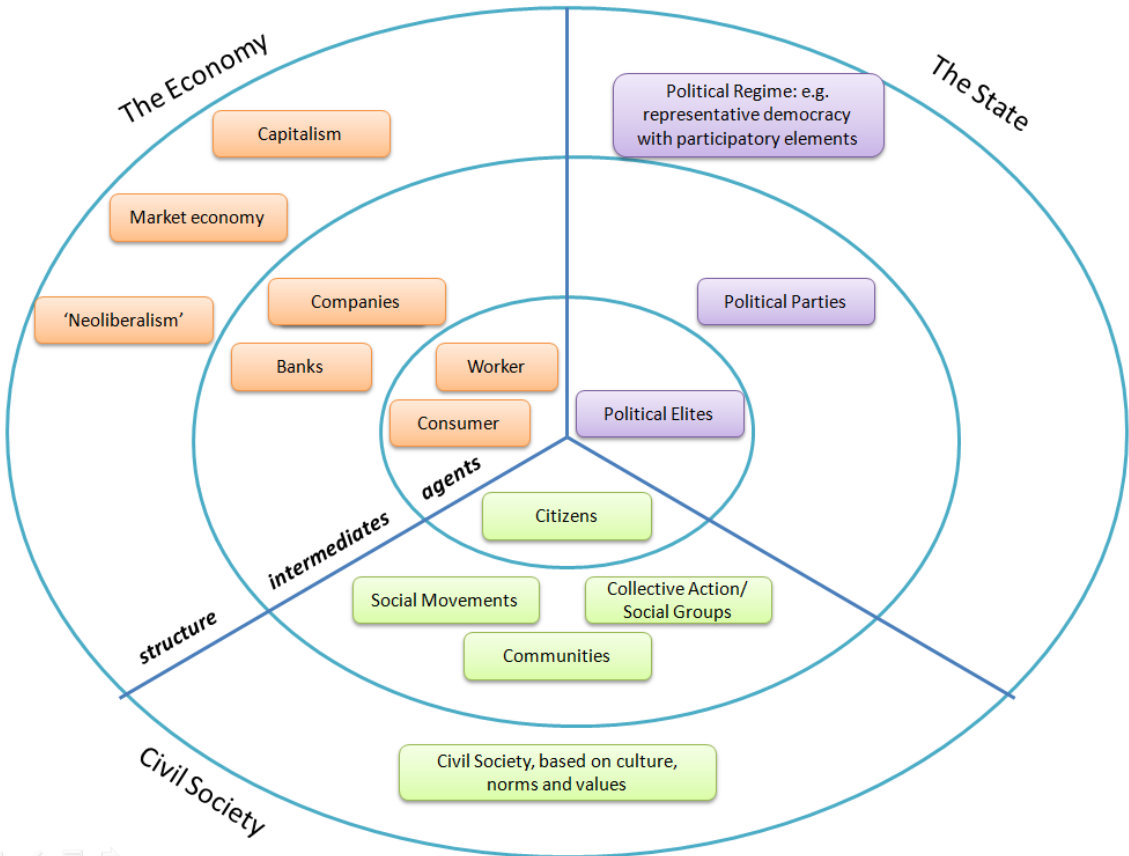


Figure 4. Visualization of the 3x3 model of social change with examples (own figure).

There are manifold approaches to social change. This 3x3-model maps the different approaches alongside two analytical categories: it distinguishes actions addressing change at different spheres, and actions addressing change at different levels (see figure 4). The analytical distinction of levels ranges from the micro-level (individuals in their social setting and small groups of people such as families or households), through the meso-level (e.g. community or organization), to the macro-level (interactions between systems such as the economy or the state). The analytical spheres are the state, the economy, and the civil society (Callinicos, 2007). Although this simplified model is applied here, in fact it is not that simple to deconstruct social interactions and complex structures into those few categories because there are hybrids of overlapping or intertwined entities. However, this model is still adequate to present the main strategies for social action as possible solutions to the identified sustainability challenge from a degrowth perspective.

Table 2. 3x3 Model showing analytical distinct spheres and levels of change.

Sphere: Level:	The Civil Society	The State	The Economy
Micro (individual)	Citizens	Politicians	Consumers, workers
Meso (collective)	Social movements, collective action by societal groups, NGOs	Political parties	Companies, banks
Macro (structural)	Societal values and norms	Representative democracy	Capitalism, market economy

Some argue that changes occur through economic mechanisms, i.e. impersonal market forces thus there is no agent needed to steer development into a certain direction. It is assumed that the economic system at the macro level 'automatically' leads to progress and for instance also environmental adaptation to changing conditions. Others see state politics as the main sphere for change. They assume through democratic deliberative processes, reforms of the social, political and economic system can be implemented. Still others aim for a shift in cultural values on the individual or collective level that in turn will affect people's behavior in the other spheres, e.g. the internalization of environmental consciousness makes them act as sustainable consumers. Still others argue that civil society does not only drives change through voluntary shifts in values and norms, but that societies need political contentious action in order to change e.g. through social movements. Change occurs due to discursive struggles and conscious contention within the sphere of civil society, despite the existing legitimized socio-economic order. The model is transferred into a table view in order to be able to categorize degrowth approaches accordingly (see table 2). Solutions proposed by the academic degrowth literature will be categorized according to this model.

3.2 Selection of articles: systematic literature review

In order to analyze the academic literature on degrowth, a systematic qualitative literature analysis was conducted. First, English academic literature on degrowth was systematically selected by using the Scopus database. Scopus is a credible database with an extensive amount of peer-reviewed articles from various disciplines, mainly covering articles written in English. Keywords for the search are "degrowth" and "post-growth" for articles that were published between 2006 and 2016 because this is when the academic degrowth discourse emerged. By excluding all those articles from disciplines that are definitely unrelated to degrowth as a socio-economic approach (such as pharmacy, mathematics or engineering), I found 155 articles. To complement the English discourse on degrowth represented in the Scopus database, I added articles from key authors of the German debate because despite their importance in Germany, they were not well represented in the English debate.

This body of literature was the foundation to categorize the articles according to meta-themes in order to gain an overview of the discursive strands within the academic degrowth discourse. The thematic analysis of articles is based on the criteria of how often certain topics recurred in the title and abstracts (repetitions of key terms or topics) (Bryman, 2008). Since I am primarily interested in the transformative potential of radical degrowth approaches, I put those themes into two groups: core themes that aim for a fundamental transformation of current socio-economic conditions in order to achieve sustainability, and complementary themes that are part of the discourse but tend to take a reformist or even conservative approach (for an overview of sustainability approaches as conservative, reformist or transformative see e.g. Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, 2005). The main topics of discourse that I identified are:

- Happiness-income paradox, GDP and wellbeing (complementary theme)
- Rebound and decoupling (complementary theme)
- Sufficiency vs. consumerism (core theme)
- Critique of Capitalism and modernity (core)
- Socially sustainable degrowth (core)
- Political degrowth, democracy and justice (core)

I will elaborate on those strands of degrowth research in section 3.3. For the literature analysis, I considered those articles on core themes that were rated as relevant. The criteria for the rating was how often they were cited in relation to the year of publication (to take into account that more

recent publications could not be cited that often yet). The selected body of literature, that is categorized into core and complementary themes, is basis for the frame analysis in the next section.

3.3 Reframing problems, drivers and solutions

In this section I will answer the questions of *how the academic degrowth discourse reframes the current sustainability challenge* (RQ 1A), and of *what concrete solutions are proposed in academia to foster degrowth* (RQ 1B). The aim is first to show what different approaches are present within the degrowth research discourse, and secondly to examine the different agents of change and different measures to tackle unsustainability which have been proposed, based on the researchers underlying premises of how social change occurs.

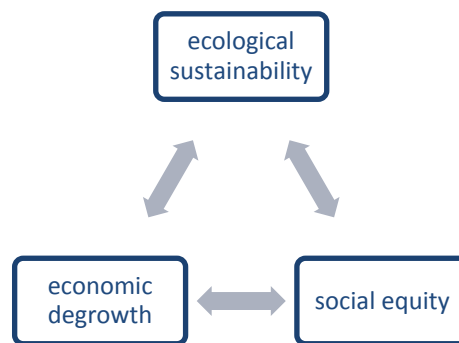


Figure 5. Degrowth approach reframing economy, society, and sustainability. It shows that one cannot have one component without the others (own figure).

Research on degrowth generally aims to reframe the nexus of economy, society, and sustainability. In contrast to the conventional three-pillar model of sustainability where trade-offs are necessary between economic, social and environmental goals, in a degrowth model, all three elements function together to ensure inherently sustainable conditions (see figure 5).

There are many distinct ways to frame degrowth that differ due to discursive pre-conceptions and due to context-specific material conditions. In order to understand how the different approaches to degrowth developed in the last 10-15 years in the early-industrialized societies, I roughly contextualize the academic debate on degrowth. I first draw on degrowth strands in the German context, which is relevant because some cases from the public discourses in Ch. 4 will be situated within a German context. Then I contextualize and complement those particular approaches from Germany with degrowth approaches from a broader area to give a more complete picture of degrowth approaches. This will be based on the analysis of academic degrowth literature in English.

Eversberg and Schmelzer (2016) elaborate on a classification of Adler (2015) who identifies roughly three approaches that dominate the German academic degrowth discourse. First, there is a cultural approach aiming to develop growth-independent and non-growth-oriented niches within the current society and economy (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2016). Those niches emerge due to value shifts at the individual and collective level (and in those cases where these alternative values become more present in society, state regulations might also be adjusted) (Paech, 2010, 2013). This approach mainly focuses on changes of the economy through responsibly acting consumers and ethical companies (see e.g. Kunze & Becker, 2015). The idea is, that those growth-independent niches can operate sustainably as independent as possible from the socio-economic structure they are part of (Paech, 2010).

Secondly, there is an approach that is for instance developed by the German sociology post-growth scholars in Jena (see e.g. Dörre, Lessenich, & Rosa, 2009), arguing primarily at a theoretical level for a radical transformation of our socio-economic system (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2016). Those post-growth considerations develop a radical criticism of the driving forces of modern capitalist societies but do not specify how to steer this transformation (Dörre et al., 2009).

Finally, there is the approach of 'Real Utopians', which is supported by Harald Welzer, that fosters concrete practices as pathways to degrowth such as urban gardening projects or community centers instead of focusing on abstract conditions for a societal transformation (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2016). In contrast to the approach of an economic niche system, this approach emphasizes the need for politically conscious citizens and social movements to challenge the existing socio-economic conditions (Welzer, 2013). Welzer (2013) argues that this change cannot be achieved by forging win-win alliances of sustainably aware economic agents but only through contentious action and civil disobedience.

To put it into a broader context, the degrowth debate sparked in the mid-2000s in Southern Europe (e.g. France, Italy, and Spain), then spread to the English-speaking countries (e.g. Great Britain, USA, Canada, Australia), and to Northern Europe (e.g. Germany, Sweden).

The first impulse was given when ecological economists such as Daly and Farley (2004) revived the critique of the limits to growth debate from the 1970s. In the same period, researchers of the happiness-income paradox (Easterlin, McVey, Switek, Sawangfa, & Zweig, 2010; Jackson, 2005; Kenny, 2005; Latouche, 2003), re-initiated a debate about the social limits to growth by presenting new evidence that economic income (in modern societies) not necessarily increases happiness (at the individual and societal level) (Bruni & Porta, 2005; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008). In consequence,

a political debate evolved about the insufficiencies of GDP as an indicator, for example in France (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009) or Germany (Bundestag, 2013). The rejection of GDP as an indicator for societal wellbeing is labeled 'a-growth' (Van den Bergh, 2010, 2011; Van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012).

The degrowth concept on the other goes beyond mere GDP critique. Whereas the debate about the GDP indicator evolved into a partly conservative and partly reformist approach (Schmelzer, 2015), degrowth scholars developed their position distinctively opposed to this tendency, aiming for a transformative degrowth concept to radically challenge the current socio-economic conditions (Fournier, 2008; Schneider, Kallis, & Martinez-Alier, 2010). The idea to foster qualitative instead of quantitative growth and approaches of decoupling (Tapio, 2005) were rejected by degrowth scholars with the re-introduction of the 'Jevons-Paradox' (Alcott, 2005), which was re-labeled 'rebound-effect' (Madlener & Alcott, 2009; Sorrell, 2007, 2009). The main argument of the degrowth scholars is that sufficiency strategies are as important as fostering efficiency improvements because efficiency gains through technological innovations get partly lost when growth-oriented social and cultural conditions are not considered (Alcott, 2008; Schneider, 2008).

The financial crisis of 2007 that was followed by an economic crisis in 2009 fuelled the debate about the growth-dependency of modern societies in Europe. Whereas a conservative and (liberal) reformist strand of growth critique called for cultural values of frugality and politics of austerity (Muraca, 2015), more radical critiques of the dynamics, that inherently drive capitalism beyond any (social and environmental) limits (e.g. Fotopoulos, 2007; Næss, 2006), were found to be considerable again. Thus critical voices on dynamics of capital accumulation (Foster, 2011; Foster, Clark, & York, 2010), on property rights (Van Griethuysen, 2010, 2012), and dynamics of modern society (Blauwhof, 2012; Næss & Høyer, 2009; Schmelzer, 2012) gained discursive influence.

The particular strand on 'socially sustainable economic degrowth' in Southern Europe (see for example Asara et al., 2015; Martinez-Alier, 2009; Martínez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien, & Zaccai, 2010) also gained momentum from 2009 onwards, accompanied by the degrowth conferences in Paris 2008, Barcelona 2010, and Venice 2012. This approach places emphasis on the democratic potential of degrowth as a societal challenge (see e.g. Asara, Profumi, & Kallis, 2013; Deriu, 2012; Johanisova & Wolf, 2012). Degrowth scholars of this approach see social change as a bottom-up process of civil society. They argue that individual changes due to a value shift from a consumer's behavior towards a citizen's responsibility and collective action through participation in social movements and non-profit oriented organizations fundamentally transforms the existing socio-economic conditions (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014). The efforts concentrate on regaining democratic control over 'the

commons' i.e. non-market capital goods (Johanisova, Crabtree, & Fraňková, 2013), re-politicizing the debate about what kind of society we want to live in (Asara et al., 2015), and renegotiating wellbeing and good life within limits in a political process (Domazet et al., 2014; Muraca, 2015). At some point as well, those bottom-up efforts for transformation need to be empowered by state regulations, but it is argued that those structural changes at the state level will not be achieved through corporate alliances but through discursive struggle and contentious action/civil disobedience (Ancic & Domazet, 2015; Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2016).

The latest discursive shift occurred, when degrowth activists joined climate and environmental justice movements to radically question (sustainable) development strategies, particularly influenced by considerations of a global South perspective (Kothari, Demaria, & Acosta, 2014; Martinez-Alier, 2012; Muraca, 2012; Thomson, 2011). The main focus is on the practical integration of social and environmental issues which stands in contrast to traditional trade-off considerations (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2016). The latest events from the fossil free movement also strongly combine elements of climate justice and degrowth. This new focus will be further developed at the degrowth conference in Budapest 2016. At this point, a new emerging German bottom-up degrowth approach merged with the mostly Southern Europe approach of socially sustainable degrowth under the umbrella of 'degrowth and justice'.

To summarize, the focus of the degrowth debate shifted from a concern about environmental, social and economic limits to growth (2004 - 2009) to a more radical critique about drivers of growth in modern capitalist societies (2009 until now), to a distinct critique on societal conditions of global injustice (2011 onwards).

As shown in the section above, different approaches to degrowth identify different problems, drivers and solutions, and also emphasize different levels and spheres when it comes to propose leverage points for transformative change. The table below summarizes what potential levels and spheres of change are targeted by degrowth solutions (see table 3).

Degrowth as an approach to frame the current sustainability challenge is also communicated in the public discourse. In chapter 4 it will be seen what framings on degrowth are applied in the texts and images in the public. Before that, the findings from the CDA of the academic discourse will briefly be discussed.

Table 3. Concrete Solutions proposed by degrowth scholars, categorized according to the 3x3 model of change (see also figure 4; table 2).

Sphere Level	The Civil Society	The State	The Economy
Micro	<p><i>Shift in democratic culture</i></p> <p>People take responsibility as citizens (increased influence but also duties)</p> <p>Citizen's commitment to participate in cooperatives, community meetings and local self-organization</p> <p>Civil disobedience and action of conscious objection</p>	<p><i>Shift in political culture</i></p> <p>(Politicians make common-good oriented long-term decisions; internalize sustainability norm)</p>	<p><i>Shift in consumer's culture</i></p> <p>Do-it-yourself skills and repair culture</p> <p>Skill sharing</p> <p>Borrow and provide things/tools in libraries and sharing circles</p> <p>Lifestyle voluntarily sufficiency-oriented</p> <p>Socially and environmentally sustainable consumption</p> <p>Voluntarily moderate work and career ambitions</p>
Meso	<p><i>Participation and collective actions</i></p> <p>Participation and support of social movements</p> <p>Networks and alliances of social movements with others e.g. academia, global justice movement</p> <p>Support for social commitment at local projects, e.g. community centers, urban gardening, eco-communities</p>	<p><i>Intermediate institutional influence</i></p> <p>Political degrowth party to ensure that limits to growth and critique of growth-orientation are considered in all policy decisions</p> <p>Cooperation between communal politics with citizens: community meetings and autonomous communal decision-making</p> <p>Participatory political processes to mobilize citizens</p>	<p><i>Ethical companies</i></p> <p>Democratic controlled cooperatives</p> <p>Local work sharing networks</p> <p>Socially and environmentally sustainable companies</p> <p>Non-profit based economic activities such as local repair and maintenance services (repair-café, fabrication labs, skill factories)</p>
Macro	<p><i>Institutionalized network of civil society</i></p> <p>Environmentalism</p> <p>Sustainability norm</p> <p>Justice and solidarity</p> <p>Democratic values</p>	<p><i>Changes of the political system</i></p> <p>Growth-independent welfare system</p> <p>Cooperation and commoning supporting regulations</p> <p>Re-democratize economy</p> <p>Re-democratization at the community level (empowerment of communities and their citizens)</p>	<p><i>Changes of the economic structure</i></p> <p>Democratic economy</p> <p>Share economy</p> <p>Commons-based economy</p> <p>Needs-oriented economy</p> <p>Solidarity economy (fair work distribution and payment system)</p> <p>Economy bound by politically set limits (resource cap and allocation rules)</p>

3.4 Reflection and limitations

The CDA of the academic discourse to identify leverage points for social change is based on one particular model of social change. Societal-economic constellations however can be conceptualized in many different ways. Distinct theories of social change have been developed in social sciences that focus on different aspects. Thus, another model might be as adequate as the one my analysis is based on to identify underlying assumptions about drivers of change. However, I consider this 3x3 model adequate because it gives an overview of where the different degrowth strands identify potential for change for their proposed solutions. It can also easily be seen where they might overlook a potential level of change. Still, a shortcoming of the model is that it is relatively static thus it does not visualize well the dynamics of social change i.e. interactive directions between the different elements. Still, to map the different solutions of degrowth (table 3) is relevant for the CDA of public discourse to see how degrowth ideas disperse in the public and to see through which channels they assume a fundamental socio-economic transformation takes place.

The literature analysis of the academic degrowth discourse covers a broad spectrum which makes it suitable to give an overview of degrowth strands. The CDA however does not go into depth at the level of different articles thus it cannot be shown how different degrowth scholars particularly frame degrowth. It might be interesting to get at the text level to examine how researchers articulate degrowth ideas, e.g. how rhetoric figures are applied to built identity, to construct villain-hero story-lines, or utopian visions.

4 Analysis II: Public Discourse

Even though research on degrowth refers to specific solutions for practical changes, science is not fostering change as such. Therefore, this analysis will look at the public discourse and examine how abstract degrowth ideas and concrete degrowth projects and practices are represented in the public. The guiding question of this chapter is *"What is the potential of the degrowth discourse in the public to foster the transition to a sustainable society?"*.

4.1 Conceptualizations: the public; areas of public discourse

The public is a sphere in modern societies where discourses between citizens on any political issue take place (Schweiger & Weihermüller, 2008). Public opinion is formed at different arenas and through manifold media channels (Schäfer, 2008).

The 'public' can analytically be divided into different public areas. Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990) categorize three areas that differ with respect to their degree of structural embeddedness and the number of potential participants. They distinguish (1) encounters in public places (relatively simple interactions with only a few people who rather randomly meet and soon disperse again), (2) public events (for which theme, place, speaker and audience need to be organized, also implying that there is a hierarchical order of people talking), and (3) mass media (where advanced technical infrastructure is necessary, where the production of news is made by professionals, and where the audience is rather unknown, broad and with reduced possibilities to influence the discourse) (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990).

Nowadays there is a greater mixing of the media that shapes public understandings due to the emergence of online communication in social media (Toolan, 2012). Although those changed media conditions are not yet fully considered in communication theories (Neuberger, 2009), it is possible to categorize public online discourses according to the three areas of the public. Public discourses in social media can belong to both - encounters and public events. The sender recipient relationship in online social media forums can be dissolved into a flat hierarchy of one-to-one or many-to-many communications of quasi-casual 'encounters'. In other cases, an organization or person who is an expert or a professional on an issue can post/publish information e.g. on a blog, online journal, or social media forum, that only followers receive. For those public 'events' where people decide to take part, there is a hierarchical order between sender and recipients.

Fairclough's 3D-model: contextualize discourses in the public

Newspaper journalism is characterized by a different discursive practice than communicative events and encounters in social media forums. Ideas and framings can be dispersed in both forms of public discourse - in slightly different ways. I will shortly contextualize the discursive and non-discursive conditions for both, newspaper articles (figure 6) and social media posts (figure 7).

The discourse analysis of newspaper articles in the mass media public is within the context of journalism. Journalism's function, besides of being entertaining, disseminating views of the powerful, and being a commodity, is "to enable citizens to better understand their lives and their position(s) in the world" (Richardson, 2007, p. 7). A particularity of journalism is that knowledge of professionals and experts is disseminated to inform the people. Conventionally, it is assumed that people would otherwise not know about an issue. Although CDA usually focuses on text production while there is little research on how those texts are received by the audience (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), I consider this to be an important aspect of public discourse. Therefore, I include the newspaper audience's comments in the analysis.

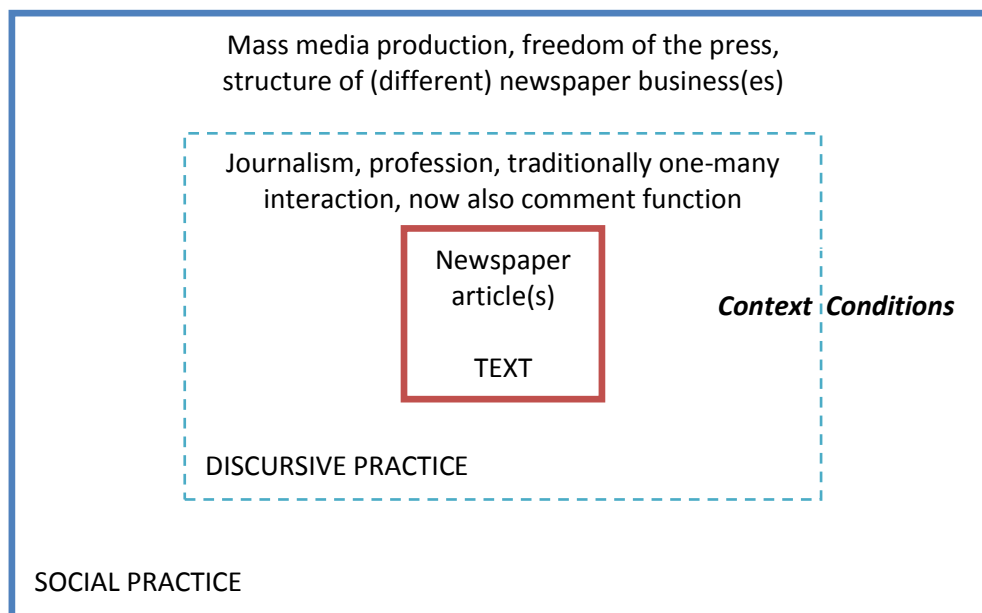


Figure 6. Discourse levels for newspaper articles (text level), their discursive context of production and consumption in journalism (discursive practices), and their social setting within the field of mass media public (social practices). Adapted version of figure 2.

The representation of degrowth ideas in this particular area of newspaper journalism is a very specific case. To include the dissemination of degrowth ideas in another area of the public, that is characterized by a different discursive practice, I complement it by a CDA of social media.

Ideas and understandings of an issue are not only dispersed through public discourses of mass media, but also through social media forums. In contrast to mass media communication, social media is characterized by flat hierarchies, informal and/or minimal requirements to participate in the discourse (principally due to the fact that only people who have access to the internet can participate). Its discursive practices also differ: since it is more interactive, conventional hierarchies between experts and professionals and people's opinions are flattened.

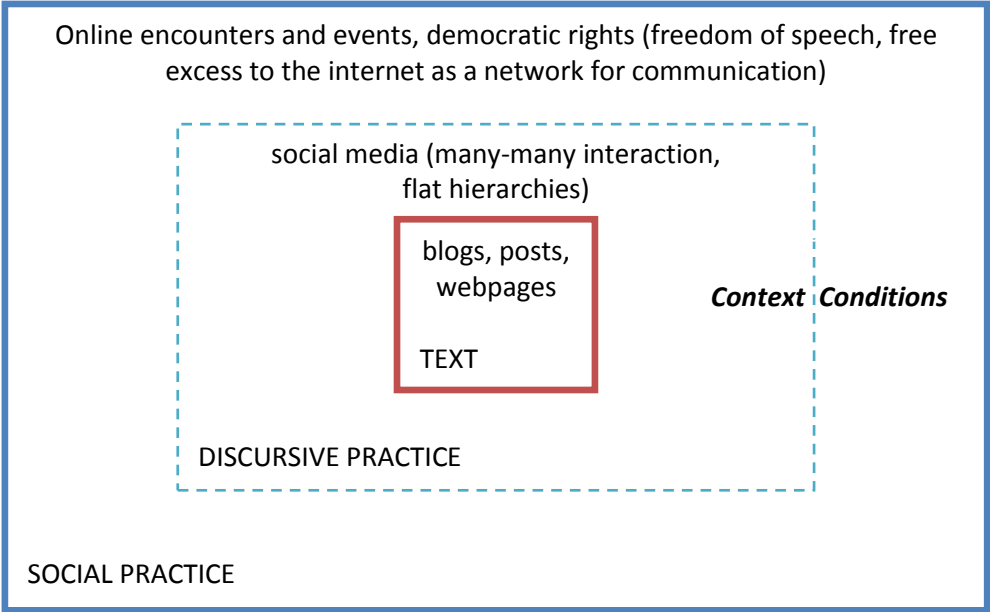


Figure 7. Discourse levels for social media posts (text level), their discursive context of online communication (discourse level), and their social setting of casual encounters and event public (social practices). Adapted version of figure 2.

4.2 Analysis A) Representation of degrowth ideas in mass media news

In this section I analyze two newspaper articles in depth at the text level and contextualize them in their respective discursive and non-discursive social settings to answer the question of *how degrowth ideas are represented and received in the public discourse of mass media (by newspaper authors and their audience)* (RQ 2 A). Both articles will be compared to see whether and how they challenge the existing social order.

One article is published in the Australian and British online newspaper *The Conversation* (April 20, 2016)¹. The article is written by Samuel Alexander, a degrowth researcher (see e.g. his academic work on simplicity: Alexander (2013)). It got many comments from which I selected particular statements to illustrate how the article's representation of degrowth ideas are perceived by this specific newspaper's audience.

The other article is published in the German online newspaper *Die Zeit* (April 4, 2016)². The author of this article is Harald Welzer who also is a degrowth researcher (see for example his work on mental infrastructures: Welzer (2011)). Both authors are degrowth researchers who try to convey their ideas and 'expert' knowledge to the public of mass media, and both articles receive comments from their readers. In both cases, the articles are written by academics for an academic audience: *Die Zeit* is a weekly journal addressing the educated middle-class, and *The Conversation* even promotes its academic quality with the slogan "academic rigour".

First, the article *Limits to growth: policies to steer the economy away from disaster* by Samuel Alexander will be analyzed.



Figure 8. Image and title from a newspaper article. Subtitle: "*The Earth is a finite place. Earth image from www.shutterstock.com*". Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/limits-to-growth-policies-to-steer-the-economy-away-from-disaster-57721> (April 20, 2016).

The title suggests that the economy is steering towards a disaster, whereas the image expresses the fragility of the Earth (see figure 8). The author thus assumes that everyone knows what the

¹ see for the article: https://theconversation.com/limits-to-growth-policies-to-steer-the-economy-away-from-disaster-57721#comment_955791 (latest visit May 5, 2016).

² see for the article: <http://www.zeit.de/zeit-geschichte/2016/01/naturschutz-nachhaltigkeit-oekologie-protest-demonstrationen-protestkultur> (latest visit May 5, 2016).

connection between "the economy" (title) and the "disaster" (title) of the finite Earth (subtitle) is. The saying "to take matters into one's hands" could be associated with the image, expressing the need for action. But if the earth literally tumbles from the edge of the fingertip, "things get out of our hands", which is another saying which expresses the danger that we might lose control. The size of the huge finger in contrast to the tiny Earth suggests that humans have the power to act upon the problem.

The text however expresses, through its semiotic choices and grammatical structure, that socio-economic conditions are fixed and that there is little potential to change those conditions. Alexander makes examples what "would" be right to do, or "could" be done, which is weak modality not calling for any action. Throughout the article, he backgrounds agency and foregrounds nominalizations, e.g. he writes about "the importance" to achieve certain things "through behaviour change". This "behavior change" is agentless. Moreover, he talks about it as if it was nobody's fault that we, the "Westerners", are "locked into a culture of overwork" which can be associated with a metaphor of being prisoners of our culture, thus being passive elements exposed to structural forces. Our potential to 'break free' is minimal. Another example is how Alexander refers to governmental spending as a "leverage point for change". He does not state that governments should change their spending. Instead, he suggests that it requires a "rethinking of how public funds are invested and spent". It is a passive sentence where no agent actively does the rethinking.

The tone also defines the article: it seems that he is the expert who is 'lecturing' his audience. With his writing style, he develops a hierarchy between his own position as someone being legitimized to talk as an expert and the reader's comments that are 'just opinions'. Since this is the traditional newspaper style, it shows that the societal order in this case is not challenged at the discursive level.

Many comments refer to other academic articles, some state their own professional experience in academia, e.g.: "As a geologist with more than 40 years experience...". Moreover, some dispute the knowledge claims made by the author as well as knowledge claims made by other commenters, or they criticize the references by questioning their credibility. This indicates that many commenters who read this journal might have an academic background themselves. Thus the exchange between academia and the public in this case occurs in a very limited field. It is almost an academic dialogue between higher educated people. The reach of the article thus does not go beyond conventional boundaries so that it can be assumed that not many people of the general public are reached.

The nominalization of agents of change and emphasis on the structural forces is mirrored in a mood of resignation by many commenters. One person simply states "too late" while another person

writes: "we live in an economic world that evolves and drifts into the future rather than follows any comprehensive strategy". Still another commenter states: "there are tremendous forces at work that make it hard to go against the flow". Those examples illustrate well the feeling of disempowerment.

An exception is the story-line of the slogan "work less, live more" where Alexander elaborates on the advantages to work less. The story is empowering for people to change because of the stylistic figure. The rhetoric he uses resolves into a surprise at the end: He starts with "lower income" (negative association), elaborates that this means "less stuff" (typically negative as well), meaning "reducing environmental impact" (might be convincing for some people, at least it appeals to everyone's morals) to "more freedom" (surprise element due to its definitely positive connotation). This story-line (in short: 'less work equals more freedom') also finds resonance by the audience where some tell from their own experiences, e.g.:

"it makes sense to reduce the number of hours of work. I have been part-time 4 days a week for the last 8 years or so, by choice, and I can't tell you how liberating it is, and how rejuvenating to the soul that extra day off is."

To summarize, the English article by Samuel Alexander, published in *The Conversation* (April 20, 2016) does not develop much potential to change. At the level of text, it reproduces the existing social order. At the context-level (discursive and non-discursive social practices) it also fails to challenge existing structures. It is an article written by an 'expert' to lecture the newspaper audience about degrowth.

The German article *Naturschutz - Was ist nur aus uns geworden?* (*Nature conversation politics - what happened to us?* - own translation) by Harald Welzer, although it does not provide concrete solutions how to tackle the challenge of unsustainable conditions in modern capitalist societies, stimulates a vivid debate. The article's different tone and Welzer's particular approach will briefly be analyzed.

Already in the subtitle of the article, the author claims that he is critical about capitalism: "Currently, we do environmental protection with the means of capitalism. This cannot work out well" (own translation). Welzer's rhetorical strategy in the article is to capture the audience's interest by telling stories about his own experiences so that those serve as example for his claims. This way he makes sure that the people reading the article get emotionally involved. He writes for example, in an amusing way, about his childhood in the 1970s when his concern for environmental issues sparked. Then, he transfers the experiences from the individual level to the state level, describing the path of his (and probably also the reader's) country, Germany, to become a 'proud eco-pioneer-country with ever increasing impact on the environment'. The conclusion he draws is that 'one probably needs to

abolish capitalism' (own translation). This claim however is cautiously formulated: the 'one' is an unspecific agent, and the term 'probably' serves to relativize the statement. He points out the contradiction of environmental consciousness and continued environmental exploitation at the individual as well as state level and asks why then we do not question our economic and societal system. The audience's interest to get an answer to this question is captured. Welzer argues that nothing changed because a frame was constructed in which environmental sustainability could fit in without the need to change the socio-economic system: "we still follow the same path: not less, but different, somehow more green, more efficient, more environmentally friendly. By framing it this way, even the purchase of a 'Porsche Cayenne' seems as an environmentally conscious consumption decision, given that it is a hybrid" (own translation). He concludes with the statement that while there is a "perfect alliance between environmental consciousness and business as usual economy", it "yawns a societal gap between the built-up 'expertocracy' and the colorful, rather politically unengaged and a-political grass root activism" (own translation). All potential agents in this sentence are nominalizations, and although he implicitly criticizes both - those that try to solve this contradictory path by a-political action, and those that got politically involved in the path but adopted to the mainstream discourse - he does not explicitly address this critique towards the readers. Moreover, the article concludes with an even bigger problem instead of proposing degrowth as a solution. But since the readers of the article are taken through the process to this uncomfortable conclusion, they become mentally and emotionally engaged with this unconventional reframing of the dilemma of environmentalism and business-as-usual pathway of our society.

In the comment section of the online article, it can be seen that people were triggered by the critique on capitalism. Even though many acknowledge, that capitalism in itself is unsustainable, they reject the associated alternatives of socialism. It seems that one cannot simply criticize capitalism without providing a vision of another system that is not the socialism many people experienced.

Many readers of this article, similar to the former article, express their feelings of resignation, e.g. "any action is a mere drop in the ocean", and disempowerment, e.g. "it seems that in our society it is impossible to live sustainably. One is part of processes one cannot influence at all" (own translation), or: "It is a dilemma. Politicians want to be reelected, companies want to make profit, citizens want to be consumerists. Where will any reasonable solution come from?" (own translation).

Still, in contrast to the former article, the readers of this article become more engaged and motivated to think about the issue on their own. Hence various solutions at different levels and spheres to the problem of ongoing environmental destruction are fathomed out. While one person argues that states should regulate industries, another person claims that "the most promising progress towards

sustainability starts with yourself" instead of waiting for the economy or politics, supported by exclamations such as: "We. must. consume. significantly. less." (own translation).

To summarize the question of how degrowth ideas are represented and received in the public discourse of mass media, it can be said that in these two cases examined, both newspaper authors are researchers on degrowth, but they represented degrowth ideas in different ways. Samuel Alexander applied a discursive practice that could be described as conventional for this field whereas Welzer took a rather unconventional approach to engage his audience with the topic. He succeeded to get the audience emotionally and intellectually involved by the way he framed the issue so that they, as can be seen by their comments, searched for possible solutions themselves. Alexander's style on the other was characterized by passive nominalizations, which do not motivate to change existing conditions despite the stated urgency of the problem.

Thus, the potential of change of degrowth ideas can be developed not just by reasoning and stating facts, but by developing certain framings or story-lines that make people reconsider their taken-for-granted understandings of an issue. The people who read the articles furthermore can be lead by linguistic features to perceive existing conditions either as given or as changeable. The way those conditions are formulated thus has a major impact on how people think on an issue and how they act upon it.

4.3 Analysis B) Representation of degrowth ideas in the social media public

In this section I analyze several social media posts to find out *how degrowth projects and practices are represented in the public discourse of social media* (RQ 2 B). As already elaborated on in section 4.1, discursive practices in the social media public differ from those of newspaper journalism.

The selection criteria for projects fostering degrowth is that they are solutions that were identified within the academic degrowth discourse (see table 3). Most cases I found can be appointed to aiming for change in the economic and civil society sphere at the individual and collective level. Thus, they typically avoid to target politicians as agents of change, as well as the structural level as such. I will present those cases that illustrate the power of storytelling and framing when it comes to spreading new ideas into the public. The focus is on how degrowth ideas are spread, thus it is not that important which specific degrowth solutions are proposed.

One prominent example from the academic degrowth literature is the call for a shift in consumer's culture by choosing a non-consumerist lifestyle that is sufficiency-oriented and sustainable. This call for minimalism is conveyed by a group in the US called *The Story of Stuff Project* through social media posts on facebook (see figure 9).

The post's function is to convey a very specific degrowth element which is 'less stuff equals more freedom', thus the idea that to have less is better than having too much stuff. The linguistic figure of combined repetition and reversed climax (five times 'less', then one time 'more', conclusion combining the words 'less' and 'more') makes this short note easy to remember and builds a mental frame that emphasizes on 'freedom'. This example illustrates

how degrowth ideas are spread by drawing on a value-loaded, abstract concept which in this case is 'freedom'. The story-line varies, but the promise of freedom makes degrowth practices attractive, it gives them a positive connotation. Interesting in this context is that the counter-discourse that promotes consumption as a desirable element of lifestyle also draws on the value of freedom, but frames the concept differently, as 'freedom of choice'. Thus, there often are great promises behind degrowth ideas. The different degrowth approaches cover these 'promises' with different story-lines.

It has been shown that this is psychologically more effective than drawing dystopian images of apocalyptic conditions (Welzer, 2013). Thus, the trick is simply to reframe sufficiency lifestyles as a virtue instead of a burden. The promise of freedom is also used to convey the idea of work reduction (as had been shown already in the previous chapter). The story-line is simple and convincing: work less to have more time which equals freedom. To make people reconsider the value of free time is to reframe it for instance as an issue of justice and equality. In another social media post by *The Story of Stuff Project* (see figure 10), laziness is acknowledged as something positive. By quoting a well-known children story, the authors of the post get their audience emotionally involved, and by putting it out of context, they achieve a reframing that makes people reconsider the personal and ethical value of free time and idleness.



Figure 9. Social media post on 'minimalism' as an example for a degrowth idea. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/storyofstuff/timeline> (April 21, 2016).

Also a typical rhetorical strategy of those posts is to foreground agency to engage people and empower them to change conditions. In post about Winnie-the-Pooh for instance they quote a sentence from the story, make a claim and then ask: "What do you think?" (see figure 10).



Figure 10. "Doing nothing might be good for everybody." Reframing laziness. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/storyofstuff/timeline> (April 13, 2016).



Figure 11. Social media post on 'post-consumerism' as an example for degrowth. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/storyofstuff/timeline> (March 16, 2016).

The same rhetorical strategy is also applied in the social media post on post-consumerism (figure 11): the discursive practice of foregrounding agency and the use of an active instead of passive sentence structure empowers people. Both semiotic choices, the emphasis on the verb "reshape" (bold) to express action, and the use of the personal pronoun "we" that builds identity, create, at the text level, the potential to change those conditions that people do not agree with. The question above the visual post "Do you agree?" animates people to think about the issue, and to actively engage in the discourse by using the comment function below the post. Those semiotic choices are in contrast to the discursive practices in newspaper articles. Thus discursive practices in social media do

have the potential to disperse degrowth ideas to a broader audience and to activate a higher potential of change amongst those who engage in this public area.

Another strategy is to tell stories about degrowth projects as successful practices. The post (figure 12) functions to convince people that this particular project is a good idea that they might want to establish in their own community by linking three different reasons together through the aesthetics of alliteration: 'Creativity, Community, and Cutting Resource Use' are positively co-notated concepts worth striving for. The sub-headline already gives enough evidence to be convinced by this idea without even clicking on the link to read the whole article. The fact that the post refers to a 'real world' case where a city established this tool library might encourage people to do the same in their community because they might think: "what is possible there, can be done here, as well". Lastly, the word 'tool library' itself is a creative combination of words that transfer a greater idea; the term 'library' implies a particular concept that people are acquainted to, while the term 'tool' gives it a certain twist that makes people reconsider what a valuable concept libraries actually are, and that the concept of 'library' is also applicable to other things one can share, besides books.



Figure 12. Post on facebook about 'tool libraries'. Retrieved from: <http://www.shareable.net/blog/edinburgh-tool-library-creativity-community-and-cutting-resource-use> (April 22, 2016).

In many cases, the practices and ideas are not framed as degrowth projects although they represent what was explicitly identified as degrowth solutions in the academic discourse (e.g. figure 13).



Figure 13. Facebook page of Calgary Tool Library with their slogan: "Think of us as a really, really, *really* helpful next-door neighbor". Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/calgarytoollibrary/> (April 20, 2016).

4.4 Reflection and limitations

I applied a theory-based sampling to select the areas of the public that this study focuses on (section 4.1). Although I endeavored to broaden the focus of CDA of the public, those two areas I chose are still not representative for the public discourse in general. The more limiting essential factor however is the small sample size of the cases from each discursive area. By contextualizing the different texts, posts, and images within the three dimensional model of CDA, I could at least point out some particularities that might influence the character of the data.

To select newspaper articles and social media posts on degrowth, I applied a non-random sampling method. When I searched for articles that cover degrowth as a topic in the mass media public, I found that there was little written on degrowth ideas. On the contrary, usually implicit as well as explicit growth-oriented news are almost omnipresent in mass media discourses. Therefore, I selected very specific articles that explicitly refer to degrowth. Since I conducted a convenience sampling (Bryman, 2008) i.e. selecting cases that by virtue I had access to, there are most likely selection biases. As I only covered two articles by the in-depth analysis at the text level, the findings cannot be generalized to be true for any expert-audience conversation in newspapers. I am aware that discursive practices not only vary between different discursive areas but even between different journals. Still, the cases show that for the dispersion of degrowth ideas it matters how those ideas are represented and communicated. Thus, although the findings from the cases are interesting and the method is suitable to give relevant answers to the research questions of this study, they cannot be generalized because I simply do not know how representative the cases are.

I applied an adapted version of snowball sampling, which is a form of convenience sampling (Bryman, 2008) to select social media posts on degrowth. I 'followed' groups on social media forums, that I just happened to know, whose aim is to continuously collect and disperse degrowth ideas. I analyzed their posts in the period of time from January to May 2016. To illustrate the findings of the CDA of social media posts, I selected examples to present them in this study. Although they serve to answer the research questions of this study, the findings of this particular analysis cannot be generalized. The locality as well as temporal context of those posts might have influenced the cases in a way that it is most likely that degrowth ideas at other places or at another period of time are communicated differently.

The set of representation of degrowth ideas from the analysis of scientific articles is probably not congruent with the representations of degrowth ideas in the public discourse. A weakness of the selection of data is that I had limited access to discourses due to language abilities and access

barriers to news and media. As I had to concentrate on English and German newspapers, I could not analyze Southern Europe's representation of degrowth ideas in the public. According to the academic degrowth discourse, there is a strong research community supporting degrowth thus there might be a vivid discourse in the public that I have not had access to.

5 Final Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to find out what obstacles degrowth ideas face to unfold their transformative potential in society. To answer this question I conducted a CDA of an academic discourse and two areas of public discourse. The academic discourse was analyzed to find out how degrowth approaches reframe the issue of sustainability, while the discourse within the public areas was analyzed to get an understanding of how degrowth ideas are represented at the text level of discourse in order to evaluate the potential of change.

To summarize the emergence of degrowth strands in the academic discourse, it has been seen that discursive strands developed from a focus on (environmental, social, and economic) limits to growth, to a critique of growth orientation in market economic welfare states. Whereas the focus initially was on the problem that our societies are overshooting environmental limits, it shifted towards a critique of the growth-dependency of our socio-economic system and a decline in wellbeing. Structural drivers of growth are for instance the profit- and competition-driven economy, i.e. bank loans and people's dependencies on them, or the dependency of the state from growth to service debt. A cultural shift faces obstacles because even if every individual person would undergo such a cultural transformation to shift his or her values, in his or her respective role in society (as politician, economic actor, career-seeking or job-dependent person) this person would be strongly influenced by those growth-imperatives.

More radical critiques emerged in the light of the economic crisis from 2009 onwards, when it was argued that the above mentioned drivers only are the tip of the iceberg. There are drivers such as our 'Western culture' and the societal configuration of capitalism and modernity that keep us fundamentally trapped on a path of unsustainability. Those drivers lead to an economization of all areas and a dominance of instrumentally rational reasoning (which is adequate to evaluate the efficiency of the means to reach a goal but incapable to provide normative guidance to define our goals). Furthermore, it leads to an 'a-political era' (Swyngedouw, 2007), where every normative decision about 'good life' is privatized and economized (Muraca, 2015).

The analysis of the framing of academic degrowth discourse has shown, that there is neither a shortage of understanding of the problem (in fact, there are many possible framings of it), nor is there a shortage of ideas to solve it. Instead, degrowth ideas face some obstacles to unfold their transformative potential because there is a missing part in the communication of degrowth ideas between the academic and public discourse.

About the dissemination of degrowth ideas in the newspaper public several findings can be noted: First, in the case of the two analyzed newspaper articles, it can be stated that this conventional dissemination form of knowledge is not very effective for transformative ideas. The newspapers only reach a very particular audience that is either already inclined to degrowth ideas or does not transfer the information into changed action. This discursive practice rather reproduces the existing order instead of fuelling discursive struggle in the public because it does not sufficiently succeed to involve others into the dialog. Secondly, with the CDA of the two newspaper articles it could be shown that the potential for change is developed at the text level. It could be shown how the different articles develop a differing transformative potential due to the way they communicated their ideas. People are getting more engaged by an issue if it appeals to their emotions and if they perceive those conditions rather as contingent than fixed.

Even though the discursive practice of publishing a degrowth article tries to restructure the existing order of discourse by reframing the issue, the discursive practice of 'consuming' the article may lead to a reproduction of the given social order. The findings from the analysis of the comments suggest that proposed framings by the authors of an article are interpreted and re-framed by the audience according to the commenter's pre-understandings of an issue. People, by processing the given information may transform it into conventional mainstream framings. Reframing of an issue, i.e. providing people with an alternative model based on reasonable arguments, may not be enough to achieve a shift in mindsets. This observation is confirmed with findings from narrative analysis, where news that clash with the dominant ideology become misrepresented over time through adjusted repetition (Toolan, 2012).

My findings derived from the CDA of the public suggest that discursive practices can challenge everyday practices and taken-for-granted understandings. According to discourse theory, the idea can become popular when it is based on 'powerful' stories and visions, when it is repeated constantly and introduced into new discursive fields, when degrowth practices develop a strong identification with the degrowth idea to represent a broader vision of social change, and when through communicative processes it can be shown that it is an idea that is generally attractive and doable.

Aspects that might be relevant for alternative ideas to unfold their transformative potential are for instance: repetition of story-lines or ideas in form of metaphors or slogans, stories that engage people emotionally, unconventional combinations of concepts or words from different fields, a writing style that allows people to perceive given conditions changeable instead of fixed, stories from cases where people already succeeded to act differently, positive visions, or stories from other places and times to de-naturalize certain practices and perceptions. To conclude, degrowth visions and

stories only develop their potential to change the current conditions when they empower various people to act differently.

Academic discourse is limited in its ability to disperse alternative framings and ideas creatively because its main function is to provide knowledge and facts. But providing knowledge and a valid and evidence-based understanding of this sustainability challenge is not sufficient to achieve a radical transformation of current conditions. Instead, attractive stories are needed to tell this 'truth' in the public. In the public discourse, the potential to spread degrowth ideas can be increased when people consider the above mentioned strategies. The discursive practices within academia could change towards transformative science, or alliances between academia and social movements can be strengthened to make it possible to spread knowledge more effectively. Inter-discursive exchanges can be fostered by opening the academic discourse and by alternative discursive practices in academia, as well as increasing the credibility of public discourses in the framing and re-framing of sustainability issues. This is basically what process-oriented sustainability science proposes (Miller, 2013). This thesis presented several strategies of discursive practices how knowledge from an academic discourse effectively can be dispersed in the public.

Events of transformative science can contribute to social change. For the degrowth discourse, events such as the degrowth summer schools in Germany and Spain, and the public degrowth conferences contribute to challenge the social order, because they combine science with action, they merge social movements such as degrowth and climate justice, and they combine actions of degrowth practice with academic research. These practices of degrowth are partly mirrored in the academic literature. However, there are many projects that are not directly associated with degrowth, and the discursive practice of conventional expert articles in the public area newspaper journalism rather reproduces existing social relations. Many academic articles on degrowth still try to convince their audience by presenting facts and evidence, and expect for instance the conventional alliance of politics with the environmentally conscious middle-class to support this change. But instead of challenging the social order, it reinforces existing structures.

To conclude, this thesis identified a gap between the academic degrowth discourse and the public discourse. Degrowth as an approach that reframes the current sustainability challenge lacks potential within the public. It does not easily translate into meaningful stories for people to change. Moreover, many of those projects in society that could be associated with degrowth are not explicitly perceived as projects for degrowth although they could be subsumed under the label of degrowth. Thus, degrowth lacks a handy framing supported by story-lines that appeal to the people. To change that, degrowth ideas and practices need to be brought under the umbrella term of degrowth. Therefore,

alliances between academic and public discourses need to be strengthened and inter-discursive exchange needs to be fostered by researchers in academia and by people who engage in the public discourse fostering degrowth ideas. The discourse about degrowth can connect the already existing projects when degrowth activists and researchers use this frame to activate the potential of change.

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