

Degrowth, Development and Social Justice
A review of
Exploring Degrowth:
A Critical Introduction

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One of the fundamental questions facing those of us who are invested in questions of development and social justice is put plainly in the title of a paper by Jason Hickel, a prominent academic in the degrowth movement and the author of the foreword of this book:

Is it possible to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries?

The answer is a definite yes, conditional on a radical rethinking of the current social, political and economic systems. The current crises that confront us make this rethinking a necessity, rather than any kind of a choice.

The words 'ecology' and 'economy' emerged around the same time; the end of the 19th century, and from the same Greek root-word *oikos*, meaning home. Ecology indicating the study of, and economy indicating management. It has always struck me as unfortunate that the logic of the discipline that descended from the latter has dominated human society in the times since then, rather than the former.

It is not that the approaches of the discipline of ecology are faultless - especially in systems where power imbalances are rife. But, the logic of understanding the world we live in and using that understanding when thinking about society and progress seems to me a much more rational approach than basing our society and our future on economic ideas that are increasingly seen to be based on false assumptions.

One of these assumptions - a key one - is the idea of growth.

The belief in the necessity of constant growth, as measured by increasing GDP, is what advocates of degrowth call "growthism". It is one of the fundamental tenets of mainstream economics - as reflected in the policies of states and other organisations - and like many other aspects of it, increasingly questioned and found wanting when viewed through the aspects of justice and well-being.

The basic idea behind degrowth is simple, and obvious to all who look at the current system critically: the push for growth has not delivered the benefits promised, and it has caused the crises we face today - environmental, economic, political and social - through the enabling and legitimisation of hierarchies, which causes dispossession and misery for the many and accumulation for the few.

This is increasingly recognised by the social and political movements concerned with these crises, but there is often a powerlessness faced when confronted by the advocates of growth and "development", because of the "obvious" need for growth.

The ideas of growth have even taken over the Sustainable Development project which was initially thought of as an alternative to it. So, the Sustainable Development Goals have "Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries", as measured by "annual growth rate of real GDP per capita" (Indicator 8.1.1) as Target 8.1, part of SDG 8 - "decent work and economic growth"

Degrowth is a recognition that we already live in abundance, that there is more than enough produced for us all to survive and to flourish. The problem is that it is all captured at the top. As said in the foreword, "Equity is the antidote to the growth imperative."

In recognising this, theorising the problems, and thinking of the ways forward, degrowth

activists and scholars draw upon various disciplines and movements. This book explores these, critically.

Degrowth can be defined as a conscious reduction in energy and resource use, designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being.

As identified by Arturo Escobar, degrowth is part of a wider trend of what he calls Transition Discourses. These have emerged from the opposition to existing visions of development and modernity. They “call for a significant paradigmatic or civilizational transformation”. These movements exist, at the moment, in states of relative separation in terms of organisation or action, despite the significant cross-pollination of ideas.

As Escobar puts it, “whereas they originate in somewhat different intellectual traditions and operate through different epistemic and political practices, they share closely connected imaginaries, goals, and predicaments, chiefly, a radical questioning of the core assumption of growth and economism, a vision of alternative worlds based on ecological integrity and social justice, and the ever present risk of cooptation.”

There have been criticisms of capitalism, modernity and of capitalist modernity since the beginnings of the industrial revolution and the imperialism that accompanied it. These many criticisms were part of social, cultural and political movements, which inspire the ideas and movements of today, including degrowth.

However if we want to identify the origin of degrowth as a distinct idea, that is recognisable in its form today, a good place to start would be the works of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, who is considered a pioneer of degrowth. His work is a good indicator of the interdisciplinary nature of degrowth - incorporating ideas from mathematics, statistics, physics, biology and economics.

As a person from a background in physics I find his work very intriguing. His work has been recognised as the basis of fields such as bioeconomics and ecological economics, which have strong links with the degrowth movement, and have carried his work forward. More than the exact details of the way he used thermodynamics, which are often incomplete or wrong, I am intrigued by the philosophical intervention that he made, which was an attempt to bring the field of economics back into touch with physical reality, to demonstrate the effects of the drive for growth.

This work is presented uncritically in this book, i.e. without mentioning the critiques it has received from the natural sciences. However, the work has undoubtedly been the basis of a the work of a new wave of natural and social scientists who are building up on it.

The degrowth movement is most active in France, where it had even made some inroads into the electoral process. This book also has the stated aim of introducing the English-speaking world to some of the key works in the degrowth movement, since much of the primary literature is in French.

One of these key texts, which can be said to be a turning point in the degrowth movement, was a 2002 special issue of the magazine *Silence*, called *Décroissance Soutenable et Conviviale* – Sustainable and Convivial Degrowth. A group of Adbuster activists in Lyon, who feared the greenwashing and re-appropriation of the concept of ‘sustainable development’ by the capitalist system, and having read Georgescu-Roegen, realising that ‘décroissance’ might

be a powerful semantic tool to radically question the limits of growth collaborated with a collection of intellectuals to produce this special issue.

One of these intellectuals was Sergent Latouche, who has built upon Karl Polanyi's approach of re-embedding the economy into society. This idea is central to the degrowth movement. The movement seeks to decolonise the dominant 'rational' economic imaginary, to achieve post-capitalism, via decommodification and economic regulations.

The idea of conviviality, mentioned in the title of the special issue, and the related idea of the counter-productivity threshold are also central influences on degrowth. Coined and developed by Ivan Illich, conviviality means a cooperative, mutual, sociable and sharing approach to practices. In terms of societies, it means that everyone, rather than just experts or technocrats, have a say in how technologies and institutions, so that technologies are selected to serve the common interest.

The counter-productivity threshold is a point at which the human time and effort, and material and energy costs, of a technology surpass the saving made by its use. This often happens with top-down ideas of development that rely on the experiences of managerial and owning classes. The case of transportation is the best example here. The preference for private vehicles as the primary mode of travel, and the steady erosion of public transport options, makes common people pay more for the comfort of the few.

These ideas, along with the ideas of commoning and autonomy, envisage a radically more democratic and egalitarian society.

Autonomy is a central political concept for the degrowth movement, influenced by Cornelius Castoriadis' work, where agency and subsidiarity are central. It refers to 'the will, capacity and capability to self-define, to decide and act responsibly within socio-political limits, whether as an individual or a collective.', as opposed to submitting to an external authority.

This idea of autonomy, along with the idea of equity, can be seen as the reason why there is a strong link between the degrowth movement and organisations such as the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt, which calls for the cancellation of Third World Debt.

The idea of autonomy also ties in with the ideas of Murray Bookchin, such as ecosocialism and municipalism. Municipalism advocates direct democracy and subsidiarity i.e. power at the local (municipal) level, often at the expense of – or in a confederated form as a substitute for – the state. Practised by Kurdish communities in the liberated territory of Rojava (northern Syria) and the highland Zapatista communities of Chiapas (Mexico) these ideas are influential in many contemporary movements, such as commoning and degrowth.

Another idea that is associated with Rojava, and influential in degrowth, is ecofeminism. Ecological feminist perspectives explore and advocate emancipation from patriarchal domination of both women and ecosystems. The degrowth movement takes inspiration from this in acknowledging needs for gender equality and engagement of all in care of people and nature, thus deconstructing gender identities and roles associated with domination and exploitation.

A changing view of labour, from a more conventional focus on production, based on the idea that the vast majority of labour that humans do is in fact reproductive labour or care work, is a theme that is emerging in modern discussions on work.

There is a need for radical rethinking of our idea of work. The push for growth is often done in terms of employment, with very little attention paid to the kind of work that is done, if any employment is generated at all. In “Bullshit Jobs”, David Graeber identifies that the vast majority of people do not feel as if their job does anything to contribute to society. Moreover, according to a New Economics Foundation study, very often, the more harmful a job is for society, the higher it is paid. Essential workers are usually underpaid. These kinds of phenomena are a result of an economism that is drastically cut off from the purported need of meeting human needs. If we implement steps such as reducing the duration of the working day, ensuring proper remuneration, and investing in sectors such as healthcare and education, we can reduce unemployment, as well as creating better social outcomes.

We will need an ‘Age of Repair’, as Naomi Klein puts it, to deal with the crises that we face. We need to prepare ourselves to work for this. This cannot happen if we push most of humanity into doing work that pushes growth and consumption, for the sake of growth and consumption. We need to recover the possibility of meaningful work for all, according to their capacity.

In ‘developing’ societies these problems have to be dealt with, but along with that there are additional challenges. This is why development is still the dominant narrative here. Post-development theorists in the Global South challenge the prevalent development discourses. These theorists object to the framing of development as the primary lens of viewing our societies.

In his 2015 paper Escobar places the degrowth and the postdevelopment movements in dialogue. He attempts to identify “points of convergence and tension”. In the years since this paper was published this dialogue has been fruitful to some extent. The degrowth movement clearly incorporates the visions of postdevelopment, in order to express what degrowth means for the Global South. The postdevelopment movement also recognises that the extractive models of development it opposes cannot be separated from the growth imperative, geared towards consumption in the Global North.

As the paper concludes: “Thinking from the perspective of the Earth as a whole, in the last instance, suggests that divisions between ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ (another modern binary), and hence between ‘degrowth’ and ‘postdevelopment,’ will tend to dissolve as pluriversal perspectives asserts themselves.”

At the moment, however this tension between the Global North and the Global South still persists and is a question that degrowth advocates have to repeatedly face from the developmental state and other development sector players, especially in countries like India. The postdevelopment narratives that Indian scholars have put forth have also not been sufficient to challenge the developmental apparatuses.

The book also addresses another way that movements are often diffused - the individualisation of responsibility. This has been seen repeatedly in environmental problems where individuals are often made to feel that the problem and the solution are within the sphere of individual action.

This is not to say that individual responsibility does not exist. The way the book has delineated this is quite nice. It does this through a clear articulation of the interconnectedness of the spheres of individual and collective actions, and how individual actions exist in “connections with collectives, with resistance and with an intelligible project – a shared, if fluid, degrowth imaginary.”

The various examples of degrowth in movements and communities also helps us to see how diverse communities adapt the ideas of degrowth into their life, and circumstances.

While the book, and the degrowth movement in general, is very aware of the possibility of cooption of movements by existing political systems, there is an insufficient recognition of the risk of ideas such as degrowth and postdevelopment, which place a lot of value on ideas of community, to be co-opted by reactionary elements. Thus, while degrowth advocates have managed to establish that degrowth does not call for austerity or a recession, they have not been able to convince many that this is not a position of social regression.

For example, the website for degrowth India talks uncritically about traditions and ancient practices, without acknowledgement of caste, patriarchy or the communal and ethnic tensions that exist in India. This kind of uncritical advocacy will result in the exclusion of the many movements in India fighting for social justice.

In India, I feel that the degrowth movement needs to work with existing movements that challenge the growth and development narratives, as well as emerging movements such as the push for a Bahun Economics.

The idea of degrowth, is a challenge to the existing hierarchies and power structures. We should not let this idea of radical possibilities be taken over by forces of reaction.

I also feel that there is an insufficient engagement in the degrowth movement with Marxist approaches, which is a shame because this would be enriching for both sets of ideas.

The book is clear that degrowth is an idea that is still a work in progress, especially in terms of how to translate degrowth into policy at a wider level. There are platforms and policy proposals suggested throughout, inspired by successful programmes in many cases. These are, in line with the general principle of municipalism, at local levels for the most part.

There are definite questions about the political future of degrowth and other political movements that exist as “open networks of individuals, collectives, projects, platforms and gatherings”

Despite these degrowth and postdevelopment ideas have been a great help for me in terms of escaping from a feeling of despair at the social, political, economic and ecological catastrophes that we face. These ideas of radical transition are some of the best we have, that incorporate knowledge and ideas from a wide variety of sources. They are a step towards viewing our planetary society more holistically and envisioning a peaceful future.

This book is a good primer for consolidating the theoretical bases for thinking through these ideas, looking at the many movements (historical and current) that do so, and illustrating the various challenges that stand in the way. It is very simply written, while at the same time being very theoretically rich and eclectic. It is accessible to both those familiar with the movement and to those who are completely new to it.