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What is degrowth?

A ruthless critique

> "I am not proposing a return to the Stone Age. My intent is not reactionary, nor even conservative, but simply subversive. It seems that the utopian imagination is trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth. All I'm trying to do is figure out how to put a pig on the tracks."
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> — Ursula Le Guin

Degrowth is a ruthless critique of the dogma of economic growth – a new keyword: a "pig on the tracks" of "a one-way future consisting only of growth" (Le Guin 1982).

Degrowth is, first, a critique of the ecological consequences of economic growth. The faster we produce and consume goods, the more we transform and damage the environment. There is no way to both have your cake and eat it, here. If humanity is not to destroy the planet's life support systems, the global economy should slow down. We should extract, produce and consume *less*, and we should do it all *differently*. Growth economies collapse without growth. To prosper without growth we have to establish a radically different economic system and way of living.

Second, economic growth is no longer desirable. The costs of growth exceed its benefits. Growth is no longer "economic". Growth is a recent phenomenon of industrial capitalism. Economists first measured it in the 1930s, and its pursuit became universal only from the 1950s. Civilizations before industrialization flourished without growth and without caring about growth.

Third, growth has always been based on exploitation. Without a surplus, there is no investment and no growth. To have a surplus, capitalists or governments must exploit someone, somewhere. If they paid this someone the real value of her work, then they would not have a surplus and there would be no growth. First there were the slaves, and the natives of the colonies. Then there were the commoners, and the workers in the factories; and there were always the women at home. Growth cannot reduce inequalities; it merely postpones confronting exploitation.

These opening statements are bold. I ask patience from the reader who disagrees. The remainder of the book explains the theory and the facts that support these claims. But let us first look at where these contrarian ideas came from, and what their relationships to economics are.

A tree with deep roots

"Degrowth" sparked after the millennium, first in France and then elsewhere. The ideas that nourished it – from early environmentalism, to the bioeconomy of Georgescu-Roegen, the voluntary simplicity movement and the cultural critique of development and modernity – date further back. Degrowth is not the natural, or only, culmination of these streams. No one can ever know what some of the thinkers who have inspired degrowth would think of it. But starting from the tree that degrowth is today, and looking at its roots, we find the following ideas.

The first, and perhaps deepest, root is the radical Western environmentalism of the 1960s and 1970s, which was fuelled by the work of two women: Rachel Carson and Donella Meadows. Carson, in her 1962 *Silent Spring*, documented how pesticides destroyed environments and poisoned people (Carson 1962). With her partner and colleagues at MIT, Meadows wrote *The Limits to Growth*, which was presented to the Club of Rome and showed how exponential growth – that is, growth at a constant compound rate – is bound to end with collapse because it will eventually exhaust the raw materials that fuel it and pollute the environments that it depends upon (Meadows *et al.* 1972). Carson and Meadows used science and facts to express a commonsensical truth that dated back at least to nineteenth-century Romantics: the growth of industry and the integrity of the natural world do not go together.

In the 1960s and 1970s, criticism of growth went beyond environmental questions. Amidst the wealth generated by the postwar boom, there was still poverty, wars and the ever-present threat of a nuclear holocaust. Herbert Marcuse, a German–American philosopher, described how industrial capitalism created false needs, producing "one-dimensional" humans (Marcuse 1964). The Harvard economist and president of the American Economic Association John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about the paradox of the "affluent society": how the creation of false needs by advertising raised the demand for private goods and increased gross domestic product (GDP) while depriving authorities of vital resources for the provision of public goods (Galbraith 1958). Writing later, in 1976, in the midst of an economic crisis, Fred Hirsch (a Viennese émigré to Britain who was a professor at Warwick and formerly the financial editor of *The Economist*) wrote about "the social limits to growth". Growth, he argued, can never make everyone middle class. The value of "positional goods" – an expensive car, the latest gadget or an expensive jewel – is what they signal about your position in society. If everyone had the good and the position, then the good would have no value. Growth cannot generalize access to goods if their essence is that only a few can have them – it can only inflate their prices and intensify frustration (Hirsch 1976).

Ecological economics – a new discipline that brought together ecologists, economists and social scientists dissatisfied with the way mainstream economists treated environmental issues – focused on the conflict between growth and the environment. The field's first international conference was held in Barcelona in 1987 and was organized by Catalan economist–historian Joan Martinez-Alier. Two years later, the International Society for Ecological Economics was founded. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (a Romanian mathematician–economist who emigrated to the United States) argued in his 1971 masterpiece *Entropy and the Economic Process*, a thermodynamic rethinking of economics, that the economic process transforms – inevitably and irreversibly – low-entropy (high-order) resources into high-entropy (low-order) ones (Georgescu-Roegen 1971). Given that mineral stocks and fossil fuels are exhaustible, human activity will in the long run have to "decrease" to a scale that is supportable by the rate of flow of solar energy (Georgescu-Roegen 1975). Georgescu-Roegen supported the models of *The Limits to Growth* with physics and economics. His disciple Herman Daly in turn argued that in the long term, only a stationary (steady) state of economic activity is sustainable (Daly 1991). The economy, he claimed, must have a constant "throughput" of energy and materials.

Ecological economists after Daly and Georgescu-Roegen criticized growth but did not go as far as advocating "degrowth" (not until more recently). The term "degrowth" was coined in French.[1] In a 1972 debate between Andre Gorz, Herbert Marcuse and Sicco Mansholt (then president of the European Commission) published by *Nouvelle Observateur*, Gorz, who had read *The Limits to Growth*, wondered whether capitalism was compatible with a "décroissance" (degrowth) in material production, which was necessary to restore earth's balance. In 1977, reading Georgescu-Roegen, Gorz argued that perpetual growth was physically impossible, and that ecological realism demands that we consume less (Gorz 1977).

Gorz was part of what was called the movement for "political ecology" in Europe at the time. Petra Kelly and the German Greens were criticizing industrialism and the pursuit of growth in the affluent West. For them, the issue was not only that there are limits to growth, but that people should organize politically to end a capitalist system that is geared to either grow or die. Gorz, Kelly and the Greens, however, were equally critical of existing socialist economies, calling them "the continuation of capitalism by other means", advocating instead for "well-being through degrowth" with "a subversion of the prevailing way of life" (Gorz 1977).

When, in 1979, Jacques Grinevald and Ivo Rens, professors in Geneva, published a French translation of a collection of Georgescu-Roegen's essays, they titled it *Tomorrow Degrowth* ("*Demain la Décroissance*") after Georgescu-Roegen's "decrease", who consented to the title. "Décroissance" assumed a new meaning in the French lexicon, becoming a slogan for radical ecologists. In the late 1990s and early 2000s activists like Bertille Darragon, Sophie Divry, Bruno Clémentin and Vincent Cheynet in Lyon published a widely read weekly, *Décroissance*, and carried out direct action against advertising and in favour of a car-free city. Right from its birth in France, the degrowth community has been an amalgam of research and action – a mixture of researchers, professors, activists and downshifters, who lived as they professed.

No academic did more to popularize degrowth than Serge Latouche, a French economist and anthropologist at Université Paris-Sud. In his

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1 Demaria *et al.* (2013) and Bayon *et al.* (2011, in French and Spanish) provide a participant's story of the degrowth intellectual movement (see also Martinez-Alier *et al.* 2010). Sutter (2017) provides a more complete, expanded and international history of degrowth and related ideas.

fieldwork Latouche showed how development programmes Westernized Africa and South-East Asia (Latouche 1996). Together with Wolfgang Sachs and Maria Mies (both German), Arturo Escobar (Colombian), Vandana Shiva (Indian) and many others, Latouche was part of a "post-development" school of thought that criticized Western ideas of development documenting how these destroyed indigenous modes of living. International development was colonialism with a different face, they argued (Sachs *et al.* 1997).

Unlike ecological economists, Latouche drew from the work of Karl Polanyi to develop a critique of "economism": the expansion under capitalism of the logic of commodity and market exchange to realms of life from which they were previously omitted. What is understood today as the "market economy", Latouche (2012a) argued, is a modern – politically and socially constructed – invention.

Latouche talked of "autonomy", a term used by Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis fled to Paris in 1945 on board the boat *Mataroa*, which rescued intellectuals who were persecuted during the Greek civil war. He worked as an economist at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) until 1970 but he wrote under pseudonyms ("Pierre Chaulieu" and many others) for the revolutionary "Socialism or Barbarism" group, which he helped to found. He studied psychoanalysis and philosophy, combining them with a deep understanding of Marxism and economics. "Autonomy" meant an awareness by people that it is they themselves that make their own laws ("nomos") and history, freed from the delusion that these are given by an external authority, be that God and the Church or, after them, markets, the economy and their experts. For Castoriadis the future is essentially indeterminable: there are no laws of history, since human beings can always come up with new, unpredictable ways of seeing and changing the world. Castoriadis criticized growth-based development as a new source of "heteronomy": a new religion of a sort – a universal imperative the pursuit of which all societies must devote themselves (Castoriadis 1997).

Castoriadis's ideas developed in dialogue with those of Hannah Arendt, one of the most remarkable philosophers of the postwar era, who also dealt with autonomy but in relation to work. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt distinguished between work, labour and "action", the latter referring to political and contemplative activity beyond the realm of necessity or utility (Arendt 1959) – what Gorz (1982, 1994) would classify as the domain of autonomy.

Ivan Illich was another great theoretician of autonomy and "conviviality". A radical catholic priest and academic born in Vienna, Illich lived and worked in Cuernavaca in Mexico. For Illich, autonomy requires simple ("convivial") technologies and decentralized, community-led energy, education or health infrastructures. Illich criticized the "radical monopoly" of some technologies, such as the car, whose physical and social infrastructure leaves people with few options but to use it if they want to participate in social life. Only small-scale systems can be governed directly by people without the mediation of experts, Illich argued. Large systems divide society into experts and laypeople. Experts accumulate power at the expense of people. Illich's slogan was that socialism can then only arrive by bicycle. A complex technological system cannot be democratic or egalitarian (Illich 1973, 1974).

Latouche brought together the ecological economics of Georgescu-Roegen, the political ecology of Gorz and Illich, the philosophies of Castoriadis and Arendt and the concerns of post-development (Latouche 2009). He integrated the ecological, economic and sociological critique of limits to growth with the post-colonial critique of development and the Polanyian thesis against the expansion of market relations. Latouche called for an "exit" from the economy in the name of autonomy and democracy. With "degrowth", he married a critique of development programmes in Africa to a critique of so-called sustainable development in Europe.

In 2008 "Research & Degrowth", a collective founded by Francois Schneider, Fabrice Flippo and Denis Bayon, organized the first international conference on degrowth in Paris. Schneider, a doctor of industrial ecology, became the public face of degrowth in France after a long march with a donkey, discussing degrowth with bewildered passers-by. The conference marked the birth of an international community of researcher–activists. The International Society for Ecological Economics supported it, with a strong contingent from ICTA in Barcelona, the group of Joan Martinez-Alier. Serge Latouche and the Francophone school on degrowth met again with ecological economics, discovering their shared origins in the work of Georgescu-Roegen. The conference and the publications that followed it brought "degrowth" to English-speaking academia (Schneider *et al.* 2010). The 1970s "limits to growth" debate and radical 1980s green ideas were back with a vengeance. In somewhat separate, but related, developments in the United Kingdom, Tim Jackson's (a participant in the Paris conference) *Prosperity Without Growth* became a best-seller. The book claimed that it was impossible to both avoid climate change and grow the economy (Jackson 2008). In the United States, an intellectual movement for a "new economy" emerged around the work of economist–sociologist Juliet Schor on overworking and the wealth of a sharing economy (Schor 2010).

The international degrowth community grew, holding conferences every two years, with 4,000 people attending the 2012 edition in Leipzig. New scholars joined, new debates opened and the accumulated knowledge of larger movements fertilized degrowth debates. Feminist economists like monetary theorist Mary Mellor (see Mellor 2010) and Antonella Picchio brought attention to care work, social reproduction and the gendered division of labour (see also Perez-Orozco 2016). Anthropologists like Susan Paulson and Lisa Gezon looked at rooted ethnographies of Western and non-Western peoples living without growth (Paulson 2017). Historians deconstructed the origins and hidden ideology of growth (Borowy & Schmelzer 2017). And environmental justice activists, from both the Global North and the Global South, brought their experience from direct action against extractive or infrastructure projects pursued in the name of growth (Martinez-Alier 2012). Academics articulated a critical perspective embodied by social movements, most notably in environmental justice struggles, reconstructing the term "degrowth" analytically. But the flow of ideas was multidirectional. It was activists, who learn from each other and read the work of academics, who came up with the term "degrowth", only for the term to travel back to academia (Martinez-Alier *et al.* 2014).

Degrowth is a burgeoning research agenda. The ambition is not only to understand the world, but to change it. So what is the role of economics in all this?

Degrowth and economics

Economic growth is a concept developed by economists. From the beginning the discipline set its mission to be the study of the origins of wealth. Economists advise governments on how best to pursue growth. The term "degrowth" would consequently naturally make one think that it pertains to the realm of economics. This, though, would be partly wrong.

Degrowth evolved as much as a critique of economic reasoning as a critique, within economics, of the limits and costs of growth. The first line, prominent in the work of Latouche, criticizes how economists frame reality. The problem is not only that the economy cannot or should not grow. Our very ideas of what an economy is are wrong. "Exiting the economy" means exiting existing economics, mobilizing different forms of knowledge, models and representations of reality to engage with the phenomena economists classify as "economic". The objective is to decentre the economy as a unit of analysis and as a focus of political action.

Heterodox – ecological and political – economists like Daly, Victor, Jackson or Mellor instead develop a critique *within* the field of economics. They accept some aspects of neoclassical or Keynesian models and reject others. Unlike those who develop non-economic theory about the economy, they work with economic theories, models or data to investigate conditions under which economic stability could be maintained without growth. Or they propose labour, taxation or monetary policies that can reduce material and energy flows while stabilizing a contracting economy. They aspire to a "new" economics – but an economics nonetheless.

The two approaches partly reflect a geographical or cultural split. The aforementioned economists tend to be from Europe or North America, their models speaking to the concerns of developed capitalist economies. Latouche, Illich and Shiva write from a southern perspective, critical of colonial relations of dependence and exploitation, revaluing alternative cosmovisions that challenge Western ideas of improvement and scales of progress that imagine the Western way of living to be the best – to be spread to, or charitably shared with, everyone else. The theory of degrowth, as developed by Latouche and others, is nourished by the works of anthropologists like Marcel Mauss or Marshall Sahlins, who documented the value of alternative, non-Western ways of organizing life; it is inspired by social and environmental justice movements in the Global South; and it is in conversation with similar concepts that challenge the idea of a unique path to development, from other parts of the world (Kothari *et al.* 2015; Escobar 2015).

Some might see this split as an insuperable contradiction. I think it is a core strength of the degrowth community. This is a plural, interdisciplinary conversation with multiple strands of knowledge, cultures, experiences and perspectives. Degrowth scholarship is confronting a formidable task: to understand critically and undo the phenomenon of growth – a material, ecological, historical, discursive and institutional phenomenon that is at the heart of the Western imaginary and its colonial dominance – and to propose alternatives to it; not only economic alternatives, but also alternatives for social, political and personal change. All disciplines and approaches from all parts of the world are necessary for this task, including economics, but not as the privileged discourse.

To communicate across disciplines we need to use clear terms. The term "degrowth" may be confusing if perceived as negative GDP growth. To be clear: *degrowth is not negative growth.* The goal of degrowth is *not* to make GDP growth negative. There is a name for that: "recession" or, when prolonged, "depression". In economics terms, degrowth refers to a trajectory where the "throughput" (energy, materials and waste flows) of an economy decreases while welfare, or well-being, improves. The hypothesis is that degrowing throughput will in all likelihood come with degrowing output, and that these can only be outcomes of a social transformation in an egalitarian direction.

The difference is subtle, but crucial: I do not claim that the scale of the economy, or GDP, *should* shrink. I argue that it will inevitably do so if throughput declines. This is a diagnosis, not a prognosis. GDP is a bad measure of welfare. It counts costs as benefits (building a prison or cleaning a contaminated river increases GDP) and does not estimate unpaid work or unpaid damages (if you clean your own house, GDP stays the same; if you pay a cleaner to do it, it increases). But whatever it is that GDP measures, this correlates strongly with environmental damage. A social transformation in an egalitarian and ecologically sustainable direction will in all likelihood decrease GDP.

This is the degrowth (hypo)thesis (chapter 4), and it might be right or it might be wrong. But the definition is clear. If throughput declines and the economy grows, then we have "green growth". If it declines, because the economy shrinks, and welfare declines too, then we have a recession, or a depression. Degrowth is when social and environmental conditions improve, and GDP inevitably declines as a result.

Here we face the limits of the economic discourse. Those writing about degrowth want to express something bigger than a quantitative change in predefined parameters. They would question the definition and measurement of "well-being", and argue that this reproduces a view of the world according to which the rest should become like the West. They would question the term "economy", a term that has signified different things for different people over the years. They would claim that degrowth signals a new "imaginary": a different set of ideas about what society is and what it should pursue. That degrowth is not about output, throughput or well-being but about how to reorganize society – reducing throughput and output are not the objectives but they are the outcomes of such broad social transformation.

Latouche (2012a) defines degrowth as a process of building an autonomous, convivial society. A society that constantly reflects, questions and makes its own laws is autonomous. Conviviality involves technologies and institutions with a "human" scale, a "de-complexified" society with reduced division of labour – without experts and "laypeople". Latouche (2009: 33) imagines degrowth as a "virtuous cycle of quiet contraction" that involves "eight Rs":

- *reevaluating*, that is, valuing the "pleasure of leisure", for example, or the "ethos of play" instead of material possessions;
- *reconceptualizing* dualisms that shape the growth imaginary – poverty/wealth, scarcity/abundance, under-development/development, backward/modern;
- *restructuring*, i.e. "adapting the productive apparatus and social relations to changing values" (Latouche 2009: 36);
- *redistributing* wealth and income both between North and South and within each society;
- *relocalizing* by slowing down long-distance trade, producing in proximity to consumption, and circulating and reinvesting surpluses locally;
- *reducing*, that is, producing, consuming, working, travelling or wasting less; and
- *reusing* and *recycling*, stopping the built-in obsolescence of appliances, and recycling that which cannot be reused.

Aaron Vansintjan a young PhD researcher at Birkbeck, University of London, imagines a society after degrowth with[2]

- a much leaner metabolism and throughput than that of wealthy countries today;
- diverse economic forms, a substantial portion of human activity taking place outside what today is the money economy;
- surpluses expended in popular feasts, philosophy or leisure, instead of invested for more growth; and
- conviviality and caring for one another, and for non-human living beings.

GDP will not be measured in a degrowth society, but if it were to be measured, it would in all likelihood be smaller, as the market will recede, nature and labour will be decommodified, people will work less, and exploit one another and nature much less.

This qualitative imagination of what degrowth is has utopian elements. It is something very different from what exists. Latouche argues that we can produce this utopia with concrete actions starting today. The transition, however, is unlikely to be easy: lack of growth in a growth society can be disastrous. And here there is a link to more "economistic" studies of the ways in which we may "manage without growth", becoming "slower by design, not disaster" (Victor 2008).

This book

My work is positioned at the interface of the two approaches: the economic and the political or utopian. This book integrates different disciplines, sketching a theory of the economy that is fit for the concrete utopia.

In chapter 2 I re-conceptualize what the economy is, what it does and how it changes, drawing from various sources of the degrowth debates. I argue that the economy is a particular social and political construction of

2 Aaron has not published this definition. He shared it in the email list of the Research & Degrowth group in Barcelona in a discussion over what we mean precisely by degrowth.

the material processes through which we provide for our needs and for our expenditures in search of meaning. I explain how some classes and groups exploit others and I discuss the intractable concept of value.

This is not an economic theory of degrowth. I do not apply economic theory to think about degrowth (for this, see Lange (2018)). Instead I offer a degrowther's theory of the economy: a theory of the economic that mobilizes concepts and ideas used in degrowth scholarship.

The result is not an economic theory but a trans-disciplinary one. My theory is not expressed mathematically, and it does not start from a series of formalizations constructing a reduced representation with a tight logic – but limited relevance. It is a multifaceted network of ideas that together shed new light on the economic process.

I construct this theory ex post. The degrowth research community has not developed a theory to explain the economy. I follow threads from the degrowth critique and various works that inspire it to construct my own mosaic of the economy. I do not claim that this is *the* theory of degrowth; it is rather *a* degrowth theory – one of the multiple possible ways one may combine the various elements and keywords that constitute the "vocabulary" of degrowth (D'Alisa *et al.* 2014a).

In chapter 3 I use the concepts of chapter 2 to revisit the origins of economic growth. Growth, I argue, is the result of the accumulation and reinvestment of surpluses of useful work. I link surpluses to exploitation – of humans by humans and of other beings and environments by humans. I outline the historical process of the invention of growth and how it became globally hegemonic, before speculating on when and how it might come to an end.

Chapter 4 moves from theory to data. First, I provide evidence in support of the core claims of the degrowth literature: namely, that growth and ecological sustainability are fundamentally incompatible, that perpetual growth is impossible and continued growth unlikely, and that more economic growth is not necessary or socially desirable. Next I provide data that supports degrowth alternatives, showing that it is possible to have meaningful employment and secure well-being with much less throughput and output than is found in wealthy countries today. Linking back to chapters 2 and 3, I explain how the theory and concepts constructed there help make sense of, and explain, these facts – facts that are in tension with the standard economic narrative.

Chapter 5 focuses on the vision of degrowth and questions of transition. Assuming that the diagnosis is correct, what would a transformation towards economies that prosper without growth look like and under what conditions may that transformation be realized? What policies and grassroots practices could catalyse it?

Chapter 6 concludes with a review of what critics charge degrowth with. I provide some tentative responses and, on the basis of these responses and still to be answered questions, chart a path for future research.