



## Book review: *The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism*

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*Schmelzer, M., Vetter, A., and Vansintjan, A.: The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism, London, New York, Verso, 320 pp., ISBN 9781839765841, EUR 23.95, 2022.*

In spite of its grim content, degrowth scholars and activists had at least one reason to celebrate the release of two Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report contributions on “Impact, Adaptation and Vulnerability” and “Mitigation of Climate Change”, published last February and April, respectively: the concept of degrowth appeared for the first time in the publications of the IPCC. At the same time, the word was left out from the contributions’ “Summaries for Policymakers” that must be approved by the IPCC member states and are therefore more subject to the political agendas of governments. Without a doubt, degrowth remains contentious in policy circles.

The objections against degrowth do not come exclusively from those who seek solutions for ecological problems within the parameters of existing market economies. Albeit for different reasons, leftist politicians and intellectuals across the eco-socialist and eco-modernist divide have also raised doubts about degrowth’s allegedly too general and unspecified critique of economic growth (see, for example, Tsuda, 2021; Mann, 2022).

It is to the proponents of market-based solutions to ecological destruction and to the critiques from the political and intellectual left that Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan’s book *The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism* gives scientific and political answers. On the one hand, they review compelling and growing scientific evidence against the dominant green growth narrative that promotes the “decoupling” of economic growth from ecological impact. Respecting planetary boundaries without overcoming capitalism’s need for endless growth is impossible, they argue.

On the other hand, the authors challenge what they call “progressive productivism” by showing that even leftist programs for social justice and redistribution in the Global North must address the need for fundamental economic, technological, institutional, and lifestyle changes. They contend that the answer to those challenges lies in degrowth, understood as a “proposal for a radical reorganization of society that leads to a drastic reduction in the use of energy and resources and that is deemed necessary, desirable, and possible” (p. 3). From this premise, the authors offer a compelling critique of so-called Green New Deal programs. As long as these programs rely on economic growth to generate desperately needed public investments, they cannot overcome the growing need of resources and energy in industrial societies. Degrowth, then, can also be understood as an exercise in political imagination, an attempt to break free from the curse of growth.

The concept of degrowth first appeared in the 1970s in the context of different efforts to address the fallouts of post-war societies – ecological destruction, growing social inequalities, and the alienation through mass consumption and Fordist labor processes. It is the book’s first objective to give an introduction to at least 50 years of degrowth scholarship and activism. The authors navigate skillfully through an impressive amount of literature across several languages. With this comprehensive approach the book surpasses the already existing syntheses of degrowth literature (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Kallis, 2018; Hickel, 2020). It presents a balanced and well-structured account of the main arguments, currents, proposals, and strategies of degrowth.

But the book does not stop there. It also intervenes politically into the “contested vision” (p. 181) of degrowth scholarship and activism by arguing for an explicitly anticapitalist – and one could add, *intersectional* – vision of degrowth, one “that sees systems of domination such as patriarchy, colo-

nialism, imperialism, racism, and capitalism as the central structural problems facing us today” (p. 16).

In chap. 2, the authors define economic growth as the materialization of the capitalist accumulation process. In line with ecological economics and eco-Marxist theories they show how capitalist accumulation rests on the unequal and unsustainable throughput of energy and matter (for example, Foster, 2000; Hornborg, 2012; Moore, 2015). Growth, then, has not only a social or ideological dimension. It is also a material process in the strongest sense of the word. It mobilizes more and more matter and energy in a non-circular way, thereby increasingly undermining its own foundations.

Chapter 3 presents degrowth as a “synthesis of different strands of growth critiques” (p. 75). It delves into classical critiques of economic growth as well as into less well-known intellectual strands that, according to the authors, should be taken more seriously to develop a comprehensive critique of capitalist accumulation. Among others, these strands include the ecological critique, cultural critique, critique of capitalism, feminist critique, or North–South critique. This chapter’s most important contribution lies in its non-dogmatic approach: it includes literature that is not part of the degrowth canon yet, thus opening the possibility for enriching intellectual dialogues. But the authors also show how critiques of growth can also appear in right-wing and conservative discourses, highlighting how the critique of growth can also be appropriated by politically regressive forces.

Nevertheless, this compelling historical account of degrowth’s forerunners has a certain bias towards intellectual critiques of growth. While the authors correctly include Marxism, critical theory, ecofeminism, or postcolonialism into the heterodox intellectual field of growth critiques, the critique articulated by social movements is all too often only mentioned in passing. A more comprehensive view of the history of growth critique should also engage with movements such as the moral economies of early-19th-century popular revolts, utopian socialist communities, labor union’s struggles around working time and working conditions, or the peace and anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s and 1980s, to name but a few. The authors’ omission of the history of the labor movement and its contradictory links to ecological issues is a missed opportunity to engage with historical research on working-class environmentalism (Montrie, 2008; Uzzell and Räthzel, 2013; Barca and Leonardi, 2018). This more comprehensive account would further support the authors’ insistence on overcoming the strict separation between academic research on degrowth and activism.

Whereas the first main chapters focus on the critique of growth and on its effect on people’s lives and the environment, the remaining chapters present degrowth as a political vision that is desirable, viable, and achievable. Chapter 4 covers different currents of degrowth and proposes a general definition which aims to be “open enough to incorporate the various currents and specific enough to sketch the contours of a degrowth society” (p. 191). Degrowth, the authors

argue, entails a democratically controlled process of transformation towards three principles: first, it should advance global ecological justice by reducing the material throughput, especially in societies of the Global North, in accordance with the principles of social justice. Second, this resizing of the economy is not an end in itself but should enable a good life for all, social justice, and self-determination. Third, a degrowth-based transformation rests on redesigning institutions and infrastructures that are currently dependent on growth. This entails technological infrastructures, social, and economic institutions as well as “mental infrastructures” like social preferences or political imaginaries (p. 209).

By focusing on degrowth’s viability, chap. 5 presents a series of policy proposals, including the democratization of the economy and commoning of the means of production, the expansion of social security, technological redesign, the redistribution and revaluation of labor, the dismantling of capital-centered production, and measures that foster international solidarity such as reparations for the most-affected people and countries or the restructuring of global production chains. Many of these proposals are far from being unique to the degrowth current. The authors contend that this is an opportunity to foster political alliances between different strands of progressive politics (p. 214).

With its focus on achievability, chap. 6 is dedicated to strategic discussions. The authors argue that top-down and bottom-up approaches are far from incompatible. Drawing on Erik Olin Wright they show that the creation of autonomous spaces, so-called “nowtopias”, must be combined with top-down “nonreformist reforms” on the state level and counter-hegemonic practices in social movements. Although the authors convincingly claim that the dual strategy of embracing the state while advancing grassroots politics critical of the state is needed, they fail to sufficiently address the inevitable tensions and conflicts that will emerge from this strategy in practice. History shows for instance that aligning local oppositional movements with state reforms is fraught with tensions. These difficulties do not only arise because of the actors’ different and perhaps irreconcilable perspectives, as the authors seem to suggest. They also have to be explained by the different geographical and temporal scales, as well as the distinct political and institutional logics of social actors. The concluding chapter points to aspects that are only partially addressed in the book and the degrowth literature in general. These aspects include class issues as well as racial exploitation, geopolitics, information technology, and democratic planning.

All in all, *The Future of Degrowth* presents a compelling introduction into a heterodox scholarship, forcefully showing how all questions of social, economic, and democratic organization must be radically materialized (see chap. 2). The authors convincingly postulate, “What distinguishes degrowth most clearly from other socio-ecological proposals is the politicization of social metabolism and its ramifications for policy design” (p. 8). This sentence must be highlighted,

for it is far from being self-evident. As several historians have shown, modern political ideas have grown out of specific socio-ecological and geopolitical constellations (for example, Chakrabarty, 2009; Mitchell, 2013; Charbonnier, 2021). The supposedly endless availability of fossil fuels, combined with colonial appropriation of land, resources and labor, created an illusion of the economy as a separated, more or less dematerialized sphere of production and exchange.

In this sense, *The Future of Degrowth* is part of a broader, fundamental shift in political and economic thinking, showing that social issues are always already environmental ones as well. The book resolutely thinks with and through the practical and theoretical contributions of social movements. If the IPCC starts to take into account the degrowth literature in its reports, it is also thanks to the myriad of actors who have come to question the different causes and consequences of a growth-centered political economic system. Therefore, we can only hope that degrowth stays contentious.

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