

Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (eds.)

Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era

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The past 12 months have seen momentous events in the international discussion on what are currently seen as urgent global issues. Climate change, planetary boundaries and socio-economic inequalities have been recurring themes within the past year's United Nation's framework. The omnipresence of the discussion enabled an adoption of a global agreement on climate change called the Paris Agreement alongside a new sustainable development agenda embodied in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The spring of 2015 saw the publishing of 'Laudato Si', Pope Francis' encyclical 'on care for our common home' dealing with all of the aforementioned problems as major challenges of our time. These developments seem to indicate that the countries of the world have finally and formally recognized issues of global environmental degradation and poverty as urgent and devastating. The need to mitigate and adapt to climate change, end individual as well as communal poverty of body and spirit, and ensure prosperity and dignity for the whole human race has been widely accepted. The impression is that the international community has settled on a problem-solving strategy that will be adapted to each specific national context and applied across-the-board. The mainstream discourse shows no existence of legitimate dissent when it comes to the tools and approach chosen to deal with these common issues. Sustainable development seems to be, if not on everyone's mind, then on the tip of everyone's tongue.

However, this could not be further from the truth. One alternative to the mainstream accord is what the book "Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era" tries to offer. The degrowth school of thought represents one stream of discontent with the sustainable development paradigm as one that will offer viable solutions. Still relatively young, with a lot of time spent on the margins, it is slowly making its way towards a more prominent position in the international discourse on our endangered physical and social world. With its origins in France in the early 70s, '*decroissance*' posed the question of the limits of the capacity for our physical and social environment to

withstand the amount of consumption the global, capitalist system requires thus directly placing capitalism opposite our social and physical survival (D'Alisa *et al.* 2014). Degrowthers find themselves standing in opposition to sustainable development embodied in the SDGs because the solutions they offer they interpret as a wolf in sheep's clothing that enables a perpetuation of the same processes that have brought us to this point. Advocates for degrowth boldly criticise our present obsession with economic growth and its power to bring about overall prosperity. In contrast degrowthers ask of us to think outside the dated capitalism-communism debate and offer a new way of contemplating wellbeing – one that is decoupled from GDP increase.

Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis from the Autonomous University of Barcelona – all ecological economists – have compiled 51 compelling, short essays from a variety of authors, spanning a multitude of disciplines and produced a truly holistic glossary that uses simple terms to explain this rather novel and intricate school of thought. The degrowth lexicon is meant to help us decolonize our mind and find ways to escape a dated and toxic paradigm of growth. It calls on us to search for the roots of modern day crises even when that requires us to go deeper than mainstream solutions deem necessary or possible (D'Alisa 2014). By providing us with the intellectual, discursive and some practical tools with which we can begin to reimagine a way out of global inequality and climate change the reader feels empowered and able to climb out of the firmly defined box of the present, mainstream conversation on these issues. An exit from these crises, degrowth argues, cannot come about without an exit from capitalism and its children – economic growth, GDP and the commodification of social relations and socio-ecological services.

The book starts with the editors' introduction into the history and basic framework of the movement of degrowth and ends with an epilogue that engages the future by bravely ripping into the current stimulus vs austerity debate. What is found in between the past and the future are four categories of essays – lines of thought, the core, the action and alliances - grouped on the basis of the vantage point through which they explain the concept of degrowth. The first part of the book hopes to encompass the majority of degrowth's intellectual roots and bring us closer to schools of thought that are in important ways considered kin. This epistemological

section accentuates the systems approach that degrowth offers by bridging distances between disciplines such as sociology, economics, urban planning and ecology. The diverse backgrounds of the authors gives the reader an opportunity to explore theories such as, but not limited to anti-utilitarianism that strives to protect the human being from being reduced to a self-serving 'calculator of pleasures and pains'; bioeconomics and steady state economics which stand as an alternative to capitalism and criticises (sustainable) development as blind to the world's physical and biological limits; environmental justice whose aim is to protect the right to an environment protected from consequences of capitalist processes – uncontrolled investment, pollution, speculation, degradation and abandonment (D'Alisa et. al 2014).

In the second, 'core' category the book ventures deeper into what we could call pillars of the critique of economic growth. Despite their potential for complexity the essays manage to explain autonomy, de-politicization, conviviality, depense, the rebound effect, social limits to growth and other important concepts for degrowth in simple terms and without pretension. It is here where the degrowth theory slowly positions itself (positively or negatively) in relation to specific, sometimes commonly held and unquestioned values. The second part of the book shines light on the inadequacy of GDP growth to not only enable, but even measure human happiness and wellbeing; they warn against the invasion of market logic into new spheres to which they are ill suited; call for the preservation of individual autonomy in lieu of ever increasing and debilitating commodity dependency; explore alternative ways to deal with surplus of energy within a community other than placing it in service to more growth; grapple with the issues of the increasing global population and its environmental and social pressures; and clearly acknowledge the existence of social limits to growth which should be taken as crucial as those of environment and resource exploitation.

The third group of essays present us with examples of practical implementation of degrowth policies or emergence of spontaneous, grass roots movements. Some of the work explores degrowth recommendations that have yet to be realized such as a policy of basic and maximum income that would ensure a certain level of unconditional revenue for every citizen while at the same time maintaining an earnings ceiling. Job guarantee

is another such example alongside the perhaps less controversial, but still not popular work sharing proposal. However, implementation has been more fruitful through a bottom-up approach where support and enabling policies for things like urban gardens, community currencies, co-operatives and off-the grid eco-communities was gathered through community pressure on municipalities. The manifestations of degrowth are still disjointed and do not necessarily consider themselves as part of this movement, however they stem from the same vantage point.

The 'alliance' section connects degrowth to sibling movements with which they see themselves as compatible. Ubuntu in South Africa, Buen Vivir in South America, as well as Economy of permanence and feminist economics are touched upon briefly and their similarities are brought to the foreground in an attempt to stay true to what is professed as a crucial characteristic of degrowth – the openness of the concept and the movement as well as its flexibility which will allow it to achieve the same end – a renouncement of the belief that economic growth is inherently good – by different, contextualized means. In such a way the book remains true to its postulate that 'degrowth is a frame, where different lines of thought, imaginaries, or courses of action come together' (D'Alisa et al. 2014).

It is undeniable that this book is a well thought out lexicon that has already claimed its place as a cornerstone of degrowth literature. However, it still fails to grapple properly with modes of its practical, world wide application in a hostile, global, capitalist environment. What degrowthers advocate is a world in which each specific context has fostered a unique way to turn its back on capitalism and the fetishizing of permanent economic growth. How this is to be achieved in a tightly knit global economy - one that will push back when threatened - is not properly addressed. The reader gets the sense that a degrowth strategy is one of transition and paradigm shift that will end once an appropriate steady state economy is established. The problems of building such an economy on a national level, within the existing global economic system are not explored, and neither is the backlash that would certainly follow. Should there exist a coordination between grass roots movements, municipalities or countries in order to achieve a critical mass powerful enough to overcome structural obstacles of the capitalist global economy? Or will degrowth continue to resist definition and maintain its frame-like form, open and flexible in

theory, spontaneous and disjointed in practice? Since the book professes a need for building enabling institutions one can imagine that advocates of degrowth are aware of the limitations an uncoordinated, incohesive movement can have. Thus a higher degree of organization and action has to be achieved to challenge growth in any meaningful way. This conclusion is obvious, but how this is to be achieved remains a mystery even after reading this book. Degrowth has confidently taken on the role of opposition to a firmly rooted ideal of economic growth, but if it is to lay claim to more than the status of a permanent critic, it will have to take on difficult questions dealing with coordinated implementation.

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