

M. Schmelzer, A. Vetter and A. Vansintjan. 2022. *The future is degrowth: A guide to a world beyond capitalism*. London: Verso Books. ISBN 9781839765841.

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At a time when classical geopolitics, war, and the rule of brute force make the more refined forms of political power and sustainable development goals seem ultra-progressive, any talk on the merits of a degrowth agenda appears to be sheer utopianism. This can be frustrating for degrowthers, who seek a more radical pathway to inclusive democracy and environmental sustainability. Both cynical realists and "progressive productivists" are putting forward arguments that aim to diminish the importance of degrowth's critique and proposals. Of course, this is no reason for the degrowth movement and school of thought to go on the defensive. Since there is a great deal of misunderstanding about degrowth (something to be expected due to the use of the d-word in the first place), Schmelzer, Vetter and Vansintjan's publication contributes decisively to the clarification of all major issues on the topic. *The Future is Degrowth* serves as an excellent introduction to the degrowth agenda and, as the subtitle mentions, a guide to a world beyond capitalism.

Matthias Schmelzer is an economic historian, networker and climate activist based in Berlin, Germany. He has published *The Hegemony of Growth* and edited *Degrowth in Movement(s)*. Andrea Vetter is a transformation researcher, activist and journalist, using degrowth, the commons and critical eco-feminism as tools. Aaron Vansintjan is the co-founder of [Uneven Earth](http://UnevenEarth.com), a website focusing on ecological politics. The book is written in plain language, as it tries to make the debate relatable to a wider audience, while the arguments are laid out clearly and the themes are well placed in the respective chapters.

The merits of degrowth are not to be underestimated. The politicization of the debate on sustainability and development, which is part and parcel of the critique on green growth and the optimistic belief that science and technology in and of themselves will solve all problems, is its major contribution. By shedding light on the way that the capitalist growth paradigm works and calling for quite radical socio-economic and political changes, the degrowth alternative paradigm allows for bringing together social movements and academics in the fight for social and ecological justice.

The book opens by discussing economic growth, presenting it as a hegemonic ideology, a social "stabilizing" process, and as material process, where an expanding social metabolism of society with nature ends up throwing more and more resources into the economy, which consequently remain in the environment as waste and emissions. This is where the critiques of growth come in. The next 100-page chapter reviews seven major critiques: the ecological critique (economic growth destroys the ecological foundations of human life and cannot be transformed to become sustainable); the socio-economic critique (growth mismeasures our lives and thus stands in the way of well-being and equality for all); the cultural critique (growth produces alienating ways of working, living, and relating to each other and nature); the critique of capitalism (growth depends on and is driven by capitalist exploitation and accumulation); the feminist critique (growth is based on gendered over-exploitation and devalues reproduction); critique of industrialism (growth gives rise to undemocratic productive forces and techniques); and the South-North critique (growth relies on and reproduces relations of domination, extraction, and exploitation between the capitalist center and periphery).

The authors claim that degrowth can be understood as the convergence of these seven forms of growth critique (p. 169). Running through these various critiques of growth is the attempt to push back against 'the economic' as a sphere of independent rationality, and against economic calculation as the main basis for decision-making. The capitalist market functions like an iceberg. What is usually identified as "the economy" – commodities, labor, and investment – is in fact only the tip of this iceberg, beneath which lies an economy that is invisible, reproducing and sustaining life, and which makes the market economy possible in the first place. The "iceberg model" advanced in cultural theory, is just one of the reasons why we should deliberate and as we weigh our conflicting values and needs as a society by no longer asking the question "Does this meet the bottom line (i.e., profit)?", but instead ask, "Does this meet our needs, values and accord with our democratic decisions?" All the activities that take place underwater, so to speak, are invisible to economics and its tools of measurement. GDP measures only monetary flows – the tip of the iceberg – and simply ignores most economic activity.

This chapter's added value is the brief discussion of growth critique outside of the degrowth debate, including conservative critiques (enactment of austerity policies so people do not "live beyond their means"); green fascism (strengthen borders and limit immigration, while simultaneously reorganizing

society towards more green, ecological livelihoods and further solidifying present hierarchies); anti-modernism (techno-skepticism and a focus on alternative lifestyles); and environmentalism of the rich (a critique of consumption and middle-class environmentalism).

Although we should bear in mind that degrowth is a contested concept, the authors are quick to point out that it is at odds with these ideas and movements. Degrowth fundamentally seeks to rewire our social system to one built around care, equality, and collective well-being. It focuses on global justice, rejects all social hierarchies and any kind of future "climate apartheid", and is committed to open borders and freedom of movement. While degrowth acknowledges the limits of green capitalism, growth, and renewable energy in a growth-based economy, and shares critiques of industrialist, patriarchal, and structurally racist civilization, degrowth is by no means anti-modern or anti-civilizational. It may criticize specific aspects of our modern civilization, but it underlines the role of peoples' struggles in achieving equality, holding a liberating perspective. It seeks to move beyond capitalist modernity through reconfiguring current power relations, rather than escaping it or absolving citizens of the responsibility to help reshape it. It recognizes the burdens of unequal exchange and economic dependency faced by the people of the Global South, who are often excluded from affordable access to green technologies reserved for industrialized nations. Hence, degrowth proponents advocate for an ecological society that includes everyone, not just the privileged middle class of the industrialized countries, and, of course, they stress the need for collective and political action, rather than largely apolitical emphases on technological solutions or individual consumption choices.

Even though there are some superficial similarities with regressive or "privileged" critiques of growth, there are critical differences. It should be emphasized, firstly that degrowth's ecological critique is based on scientific and empirical evidence of the impossibility of infinite growth, with the decoupling hypothesis (about the environmental impacts from growth) being the main battlefield with the green-growthers. Secondly, degrowth, precisely because it integrates all seven critiques of growth, shares a holistic vision of ecological and social justice, solidarity and a good life for all, that can only be achieved by combating class, gender and race inequalities, global injustice, the imperial mode of living, and imperialism.

The following chapter discusses the entire spectrum of degrowth's visions. Such imaginaries include (a) the institution-oriented current (aiming to overcome the political fixation on growth and transformation of previously growth-dependent and growth-driving institutions through reforms and policies of sufficiency); (b) the sufficiency-oriented current (aiming to radically reduce resource consumption through the creation of local and decommercialized subsistence economies, do-it-yourself initiatives, and "voluntary simplicity"); (c) the communing, or alternative economy current (focusing on the construction of alternative infrastructures, cooperatives based on solidarity, and non-capitalist forms of collective production); (d) the feminist current (seeking to place reproductive activities and care at the centre of the economy and economic thinking, while aiming to overcome the separation between production and reproduction); and (e) the post-capitalist and alter-globalization current (aiming at fundamental structural changes – from the way we work to forms of ownership, and striving to undo the domination of the market, socialize key sectors of the economy, and reduce social relations of domination).

After discussing various attempts at defining degrowth, the authors come up with their own framing of the concept, where they propose a degrowth society which:

...in a democratic process of transformation: 1. enables global ecological justice – in other words, it transforms and reduces its material metabolism, and thus also production and consumption, in such a way that its way of life is ecologically sustainable in the long term and globally just; 2. strengthens social justice and self-determination and strives for a good life for all under the conditions of this changed metabolism; and 3. redesigns its institutions and infrastructure so that they are not dependent on growth and continuous expansion for their functioning. (p. 195)

Following Eric Olin Wright's three criteria for evaluating social alternatives, after having presented the critiques of growth, and hence the necessity of change and the desirability for a degrowth society in the first half of the book, the second half focuses on the viability and achievability of the degrowth vision.

Regarding the viability of degrowth, the chapter on the pathways to degrowth focuses on some basic policy proposals, such as: (a) the democratization of the economy, or, the strengthening of the commons, a solidarity-based economy, and economic democracy; (b) social security, redistribution, and caps on income

and wealth; (c) convivial and democratic technology; (d) the redistribution and revaluation of labor; (e) the equitable dismantling and reconstruction of production; and (f) international solidarity. According to the authors, these clusters of policies indicate that the degrowth society is not only desirable, but also viable and functional.

Regarding achievability, it is stressed that policy alone should not be the sole driver of change. Policies can make the degrowth project viable, but what is also needed is what I would call the political perspective; i.e. considerations as to who is in a position to carry out and implement these fundamental societal transformations, under what conditions, and through which alliances. The authors support a combination of collective action, grassroots change, and policy reforms that could work together to make degrowth a reality (p. 215). The respective chapter focuses on transformation, and a theory of change is presented that links the required bottom-up social movements with the large-scale policy changes needed to make degrowth concrete. A discussion follows on (a) "nowtopias" of autonomous spaces and laboratories for the good life; (b) non-reformist reforms that can change institutions and policies; (c) the counter-hegemony of building people power against the growth paradigm, and (d) confrontation with various crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which present both opportunities for building counter-hegemonic common sense and risks of strengthening the Right and reinforcing the growth paradigm, capitalist hegemony, as well as the logic of law and order that supports it.

The last chapter of the book is of particular importance. The authors lay out their views on four challenges—hence priorities—of the degrowth agenda. **First**, the authors acknowledge that:

...in parts of the degrowth discussion, there is a tendency to mainly focus on ecological issues and to do so from a class-blind and consumer focused perspective that downplays social issues and fundamentally depoliticizes degrowth. This may be due to the fact that in the degrowth spectrum, a majority of participants are white, come from privileged social contexts in the Global North, and have academic backgrounds. (p. 289)

This focus on the individual eco-conscious consumer "ignores the perspectives of people who can't afford to do so and it stands in the way of a broader growth critique and the development of majorities who would support degrowth positions" (p. 289). So, the authors are adamant that degrowth

...should speak directly to the question of class inequality, acknowledge and address the existing structural growth dependencies and their repercussions, analyse the role of consumption and the critique of consumerism through the lens of class, and emphasize distributive justice, public abundance, and social security in the vision of a degrowth society. (p. 289).

In addition, they warn that not only class but also race is under-explored within degrowth.

**Second**, this work is very timely in that it acknowledges that degrowth advocates are side-lining the geopolitical ramifications of the transition that they envision by focusing mainly on cultural critiques or normative discussions about consumer society and bottom-up alternatives. The relationship between growth, the state, imperialism, and militarization, and the political-economic effects degrowth would have on international relations and communities in the Global South are not adequately tackled. Thus, for the advancement of degrowth, closer links are needed with fields that study geopolitical, world-system, and securitization dynamics, as well as building alliances with anti-militarist, anti-imperialist, and decolonial movements.

A **third** area that degrowth needs to be more involved in is the digitalization of the economy and its repercussions on resource and energy consumption, well-being, alienation, accumulation and other important dimensions. Degrowth's critique of Silicon Valley's endless pursuit of growth by constantly creating new products so as to respond to the saturation in consumer markets should not dissuade it from clarifying its position concerning technology, especially information technology. The obvious response to those who spend all their time and resources on ventures that just help sustain an economic system based on continuous accumulation is to stop the growth machine and create technologies that actually benefit us and allow convivial relationships to flourish. Accordingly, closer cooperation is needed with the peer-to-peer movement, innovations with new currencies and value production, manufacturing, and knowledge-sharing. Links need to be built between degrowth and labor movements in the information technology and logistics industries, the communities living and working around rare earth and lithium mines, and those

living in the sacrifice zones of toxic waste generated by information technology. Connecting those struggles with an analysis of the material impacts of smart technologies is imperative.

The **fourth** area in which degrowth should further elaborate its positions concerns "democratic planning." This is particularly true since degrowth favors decentralized structures over hierarchical and bureaucratic centralized ones. Degrowth calls for a democratically planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the environment in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being, requiring the transformation of our infrastructure, energy systems and entire economy. So degrowth should be actively engaged in political debates and participate in the realities of short and long-term planning. It should clearly state its positions regarding issues such as:

...the management of absolute caps in resource use and emissions, their harmonization with social targets such as universal access to essential goods and services, planning just transitions in the phase-out of dirty sectors, or questions regarding the participatory planning of investment and divestment decisions, including technological innovation and what has been discussed as collective *dépense*. Practically, questions need to be asked regarding how degrowth would relate to, for example, the logistics industry, existing infrastructure projects, and the democratic management of planning. (p. 296)

The authors end their tour of degrowth by acknowledging that there remain, of course, many open questions, political challenges and conceptual opportunities, but that these can be addressed through critical debate and political engagement. I could not agree more. Overall, I think that degrowth, in the sense that is described in this book, i.e. an emerging scientific research paradigm *and* a political project, has over recent years provided one of the most innovative critiques and proposals for social-ecological transformation. It has infused the critique of capitalism with new perspectives that have until now been ignored by major schools of thought and political forces. Even though some of its proposals may sound politically naïve, romantic and inappropriate, its ecological critique contains strong points, and, as far as I am concerned, shifts the burden of proof concerning solutions to climate and social crises to optimistic eco-modernists from all political backgrounds. This makes this book particularly useful for planners, policy advocates, and advisors.

Escaping our dystopian existence for a moment and assuming that there will be a future for the planet and humankind after all, a degrowth society as defined above is certainly the optimal setting. I concur with the authors that political mobilization is needed based on an alliance of social movements and political forces opposing both capitalist globalism and authoritarian nationalism, but this is a daunting challenge.

## Reference

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