

Kallis, G., Paulson, S., D'Alisa, G. & Demaria, F. 2020. *The case for degrowth*. Polity. ISBN 9781509535637. €11.30 (paperback)

Reviewed by Grace Wright-Arora & Wallerand Bazin. Email: [grace.wright "at" ouce.ox.ac.uk](mailto:grace.wright@ouce.ox.ac.uk)

The case for degrowth, by Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D'Alisa and Federico Demaria (2020), is a 120-page primer on the economics and philosophies of degrowth, written by some of its key proponents. The book has the stated aim to "motivate and empower citizens, policy makers, and activists to reorient livelihoods and politics around equitable wellbeing" (p. 5), and we review it here according to this purpose. The book states that the ideas and practices of degrowth strive to "halt the growth of material use and market transactions; and build institutions, relationships, and persons to live well without growth" (p. 18). After arguing that perpetual and compound growth is neither feasible nor desirable considering the impossibility of sufficient absolute decoupling of carbon emissions from economic growth, and evidence of rising inequality, debt, financial, and ecological crises, the authors survey prefigurative instances of degrowth, before sketching a five-point reform proposal for a degrowth economy. The book finishes with strategies to politically mobilize for degrowth. The authors follow a logical progression from critique to "solution," offering tangible policy ideas alongside philosophical underpinnings.

Arguments made in *The case for degrowth* ultimately hinge on the economics, politics and ontologies of degrowth. Degrowth represents one important way that political ecologists' work in critical social theory can be translated into policy, and as such is a key concern for political and praxis-orientated scholars. The book succinctly synthesizes "seeding" for degrowth futures, but political ecologists' "hatchet" method (Robbins, 2020, p. 99) also sheds light on two avenues for further exploration that we explore here:

- (1) clarifying the relationship between ontology, environmental science, and economic theory
- (2) addressing the balance, and potential friction, between the desirability and feasibility of degrowth and green growth.

These are not limitations of the book, but rather reflections of an emerging academic field that is beginning to explore concrete policy proposals that translate and expand its theoretical foundations.

The book begins by informing readers that there is "no doubt about the evidence" that economic growth is not globally sustainable (p. 2). It then segues to analyzing the 'drive for growth,' embedded in the epistemological and ontological frameworks of "many—although not all—places and persons." At this juncture, political ecologists might interrogate the ontological nuances of the degrowth argument, namely differentiating between the empirical unfeasibility of growth and yet the way it is firmly embedded in certain societies' worldviews. While the authors explain successfully how ontology and epistemology connect individual human behavior with the macroeconomy, there may be moments where a more skeptical reader would benefit from further clarification—especially regarding the empirical relationship between economic growth and carbon emissions. The authors flesh out their basis for arguing carbon emissions cannot be decoupled from growth in an insightful FAQ chapter at the end of the book (p. 110-112). However, considering this claim is foundational for the book's economic rationale, an earlier explanation of this reasoning may have strengthened its persuasiveness.

The authors have published extensive works elsewhere to this effect (including Demaria *et al.*, 2013; D'Alisa *et al.*, 2014; Kallis, 2017, 2018). Their corpus counters claims that have appeared in recent critiques suggesting the degrowth movement is 'opinion' rather than 'evidence'-based; in actuality, degrowth scholarship is now underpinned by interdisciplinary and scientific studies, and critical theory (Antal & Van Den Bergh, 2016; Luzzati *et al.*, 2018; Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Warlenius, 2023; Savin & van den Bergh, 2024; Lauer *et al.*, 2025). Yet this ongoing conversation between degrowthers and their opponents point to where greater clarity could benefit the movement – and where political ecology can contribute. Political ecology, drawing from fields like science and technology studies, neo-Marxian political economy, and more-than-human geography, can

help elucidate entanglements between ontology, climate science, and economic theory and clarify how these different fields shape an economy that currently presents perpetual growth as the best, or only feasible, solution to environmental crises. If ontology is understood in simple terms as a worldview and epistemology as a theory of knowledge, perhaps political ecology can help to draw out how ways of knowing and perceiving the world contribute to the real, material economic conditions that currently lead to climate breakdown, making clear why researching ontologies is distinct to, but as important as, positivist empiricism in the degrowth field (Savin & van den Bergh, 2024).

In the final three chapters, *The case for degrowth* shifts to explore visions of a degrowth future and possible pathways for achieving this. The authors highlight social and policy pre-figurations of a future in which people live simply with less (a core tenet of the degrowth imperative). Individual lifestyle changes, such as forming shared communities or commons, are connected to broader structural policy reforms. The reforms suggested are a Green New Deal without growth, universal basic income/care, reclaiming the commons, reducing working hours, and green public finance. The key question that arises from these proposals for a political ecologist may be not their desirability but their feasibility, along with a reflexive assessment of their limitations, in a world facing geopolitical conflicts and international rivalries (Wouters, 2024). While the book touches upon the need for international cooperation (Chapter 5, in particular p. 94-104), engagement with how degrowth policies would navigate the realities of geopolitical tension could strengthen the book's persuasiveness, particularly for policymakers.

As the field of degrowth continues to evolve, political ecology has much to offer in shaping these vital conversations. It can help to draw out the science-politics relations that contribute to a societal tunnel vision where economic growth is touted as the only possible option. It could clarify how economic theory, ontological politics and climate science connect to each other. It can also assist in elucidating the difference between feasibility and desirability in degrowth scholarship, not to denigrate the movement but rather to contribute to building a case for degrowth that may convince not just sympathetic activists but also skeptical policymakers and politicians. The political ecological consequences of a degrowth economy must be explored further to reflect on the potential outcomes of the radical social and economic restructuring it proposes.

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Grace Wright-Arora is a doctoral researcher at the University of Oxford and co-supervised at ICTA-UAB (Barcelona). She researches the global financing of water climate adaptation programs in Latin American cities, specifically focused on water scarcity in Mexico City, and explores resistances to water financialization across the city. Wallerand Bazin is a DPhil candidate in Human Geography at the University of Oxford, working on European nature recovery politics and exploring the politics of knowledge, land access and landscape aesthetics in the UNESCO cultural landscapes of the Cévennes (France) and Lake District (England).