



## The vocabulary of degrowth: A roundtable debate\*

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Alexander Paulsson, Giorgos Kallis, Stefania Barca and Giacomo D'Alisa

**Alexander Paulsson (AP):** A very warm welcome to all the participants of this roundtable, where we will discuss *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era* published by Routledge in 2015. Giorgos Kallis and Giacomo D'Alisa – co-editors of the book together with Federico Demaria – are here today. Stefania Barca and Ekaterina Chertkovskaya will act as discussants. We will also have plenty of time for general discussion. Giorgos, would you like to start?

**Giorgos Kallis (GK):** My starting point is an essay I've recently discovered in *the Guardian* by Doreen Massey, a notable critical geographer and political ecologist in a broad sense, who sadly passed away two weeks ago. The title of the essay was 'Neoliberalism has hijacked our vocabulary'. Massey takes issue with keywords like 'adjustment' and 'austerity' that neoliberalism has introduced into our vocabulary and that have become the common sense of our times, words that people take for granted. And interestingly, she says that the most depoliticised of these words, the one that nobody ever questions, is that of growth.

Our book is precisely about confronting the capitalist vocabulary of growth and offering a new vocabulary in its place – a vocabulary for a new era of secular stagnation, growing inequalities and an impending climate disaster. We are not providing in this book a theory, a blueprint or a manifesto for degrowth. What we are providing are keywords that articulate and develop an alternative vocabulary.

---

\* The roundtable took place at the ENTITLE conference in Stockholm, titled *Undisciplined environments* (20-24 March 2016). This is an edited transcription of the discussion. We would like to thank all the participants of the session for a thought-provoking discussion.

An ecologist, radical, critical, green, left – however you might want to call it – vocabulary around this new key term ‘degrowth’.

I want to make clear from the beginning that degrowth is not the inverse of growth. It’s not negative GDP growth, which is an oxymoron, and also bad English, since growth cannot be negative. It’s not the inverse relation of what the economy is doing, i.e. it is not about doing less of the same. Degrowth is something very different. First and foremost, degrowth is the critique of the ideology of growth. We show how growth is ideologically and socially constructed, but also expose the horror of growth, its consequences that are often silenced and overlooked. Second, degrowth is a hypothesis for something new, which includes the ecological demand – smaller metabolism, less throughput, less material and energy use. Crucially, we argue that this less is not just a matter of less of the same, but it’s different, changing our social organisation so that we can also live with producing and consuming less.

We have drawn a ‘graph’ to capture degrowth – not one with numbers, but an elephant, which is a metaphor for the economy. And we are saying degrowth is not a leaner elephant, it’s not less of the same – this is called recession. Degrowth is about less and different. It is symbolised by a snail, an animal with a smaller metabolism, smaller because it is a very differently organised body.

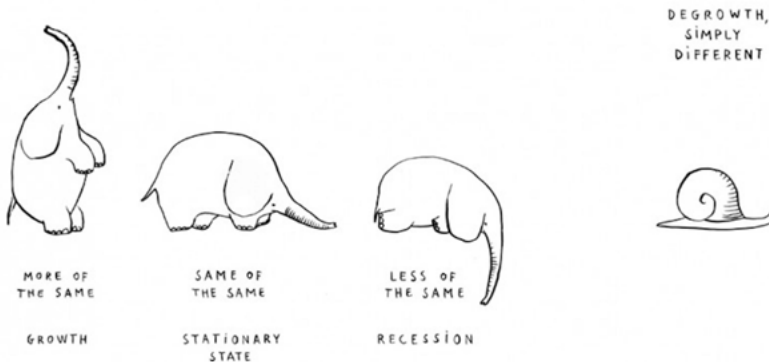


Figure 1: *The elephant and the snail* (by Bàrbara Castro Urío).

Our book is structured in four sections, four different groups of keywords, and each chapter/entry is one keyword. The first group of keywords are schools of thought that have influenced the theory of degrowth. Political ecology, the subject of this conference, is one of them – there is an entry written by anthropologist Susan Paulson, a well-known and prolific writer on political ecology. Susan

explains what political ecology is and how it relates to the ideas of degrowth that we present in this book. Other schools of thought included in the book are bioeconomics or ecological economics, the community from which we [the three editors] are coming from.

The second part of the book includes keywords that are crucial in the critique that's been formulated in the name of degrowth. And there we have terms like commodification – bringing goods, services, relationships that are not mediated by exchange for profit into the market. Degrowth is not just a critique of growth – the expansion of the economy in the sense of producing more, but also in the sense of incorporating more and more of unmonetised activity into the GDP economy. For example, for Serge Latouche – a French scholar and one of the first people who popularised the term degrowth ('decroissance' in French) – his main influence was the work of Karl Polanyi, who wrote on fictitious commodities. Latouche builds a case for decommodification, that is taking things out of the market and bringing them back to the social, convivial and political realms.

Within the same section we have the commons, another important keyword for degrowth. We also have an entry by Erik Swyngedouw, another notable political ecologist, about depoliticisation. He explains that we live in a post-political condition when most social problems are framed as technical problems. For example, the increase of GDP growth. It's treated as a technical problem, with expert economists telling us what to do, like the Troika telling Greece the recipes for the economy to start growing again. This is a simplification that is technical and apolitical in the sense that it disguises the real political redistributive questions that are at stake and that it hides irreducible differences under a technical discourse.

So what is the point of degrowth? I would say that degrowth is a re-radicalisation of environmentalism. I'm reading a book these days about the history of the green movement. Some of you might have read it, it's by Andrew Dobson, called *Green political thought*, written in the early 90s. He makes a distinction between ecologism and environmentalism. The latter takes a techno-managerial approach, environmental problems treated as technical problems that merit a technical or managerial solutions. Ecologism instead was the ideology of the green political movement and of the radical greens of the 1970s. For them the issue wasn't just about protecting the environment, but about creating a different world for humans and non-humans. This world was bringing additional demands to socialism or communism. The green movement was bringing something extra in addition to other egalitarian ideologies. It was envisioning a different relationship with the non-human world too. This fundamentally had to do with the idea that there are limits or, more precisely, as I will argue below, that there should be

limits. 'Limits to growth' was a milestone text for the ecological movement, for ecologists in the 70s, as Dobson rightly puts it.

This radical discourse within the environmental movement got sidelined over time. In the neoliberal times techno-managerial environmentalism became dominant. The dominant discourse was about 'solving' problems. Many environmentalists stopped saying 'no' and sat together with businesses and governments at the table, trying to find consensual – win-win as they are called in the managerial jargon – solutions. 'Sustainable development' was the talk of the day. You know, you might have seen the thousands of reports and powerpoints with win-win-win triangles – society, economy, environment all harmoniously balanced together, or private sector, NGOs, civil society – sustainability at the center of the triangle. With the so-called 'end of history', or what Swyngedouw calls the post-political condition, the radical demands of ecologism were co-opted and assimilated into a green-washing discourse that suggested that we can have our cake and eat it all.

In one sense then degrowth simply brings back the radical side of ecologism and renews and re-radicalises its vocabulary. But are we also offering something new in green thought? First of all, we make explicit that the limits to growth are not something external; it is a social demand – we *want* to limit growth. It's not that growth is limited and we worry that capitalism might collapse. Limits in our theory are not coming from the outside, from a 'nature out there' that is running out of things. Of course we do take nature into account, we take non-human agency into account and we say we know there is climate change, we know that we are screwing up our planet, we know that we are producing unliveable environments. Precisely for all this, we call for limits, we want to limit collectively what we do and what to pursue and what not, and most importantly we want to create the social conditions that make it possible to limit what we do; discussing democratically what we want to limit and what not is the central question.

The second novelty is that we want to reframe the environmental question and rather than start from claims of scarcity, i.e. that there is not enough, start from the premise of abundance. This might seem paradoxical as the idea that there is not enough is so ingrained in environmentalism. We argue instead, alongside radical anthropologists, that there has always been enough. We do not have to wait for some never arriving future when we will have developed the forces to production to a level that will provide us with enough. Indeed, most civilizations apart from the capitalist one had a sense that they had more than enough for what they need. If you read ancient Greek philosophy, you will find this everywhere. If you read about ethnographies of indigenous civilizations, you find the same philosophy. People who seem poor from the Westerner's gaze, they

thought they had enough. Most civilizations did not have a word for scarcity as a universal condition, nor did they consider growth in production or consumption a goal worth pursuing. The idea was that there is enough to live a good life, as long as ends are limited within what is generously made available by nature. This is the premise with which we start the epilogue of our book.

A little bit more controversially, we throw in this epilogue the idea of ‘depense’. This departs from the idea that the economic problem is not a problem of scarcity, but of excess. Societies will produce a surplus, over and above what is necessary for mere reproduction. And the political question is what we do with this surplus. Are we using it to build pyramids, churches and prisons? Are we reinvesting it for more growth and more surplus? Or do we use it for collective festivities, expending the surplus collectively and creating society and meaning along the way? – that’s our proposal. In a way it’s a utopian proposal, but I think the point is not in the specifics ‘ok, how exactly do we do it, are we going to spend the surplus here or there?’. It is in shifting the minds and the imaginaries, especially of ecologists and economists, from one that sees ever-present scarcity and is constantly preoccupied with things running out to one of ‘we already have enough’, the question becoming how we can constrain our ends and redistribute resources so that everyone can live well with enough. Ok, I will leave it here.

**AP:** Thanks very much, let’s now commence the discussion. The book covers a lot of concepts and sub-themes within degrowth. But now that it has been in circulation for a bit over a year, is there something you feel is missing, what are the white spots or blind spaces?

**Stefania Barca (SB):** First of all, what I like about the vocabulary is that there is no limit to the number of words you can put in it, it’s not like the alphabet, which is just a certain number of letters. So I see this really as the beginning, of building a new paradigm, which is a reinvention of ecological ideas for our generation and in this particular part of the world [the so called global north is implied here], and I will go back to that. In this perspective, I don’t want to say what is missing from the book because of course every book is limited, but here’s what the book made me think we should discuss.

It would be really important to think more about a history of degrowth – where do degrowth and growth come from? We are at the final moment of a long story, which is basically the story of economic growth, and how economic growth came to dominate, to colonise our minds, our political system and the world economy. The concept of growth is not just depoliticised, it’s also naturalised, in a way that it’s considered like something that human civilizations have always aimed for,

which is not the case. As far as I have been able to research it, growth is very much an idea of the twentieth century, and even more of its second half.

During this time, ‘modern economic growth’ became a master narrative that sees modernity in the last two hundred years as the era in which humanity has been able to overcome scarcity. This is the idea that is repeatedly taught in any economics and economic history textbook – in the last two hundred years humanity has finally been able to overcome the big historical problem of scarcity, of the limits to population and the limits to wealth, and we have entered the era of unlimitedness. I am very critical of this narrative for a number of reasons, but the point here is that, whatever the flaws of ‘modern economic growth’, this era is coming to an end. We could even see our epoch as having passed peak growth, in the sense that globally economic growth rates have already started to decline in relative terms. So want it or not, we are faced today with the beginning of a post-growth – or whatever you want to call it – era.

**Ekaterina Chertkovskaya (EC):** It’s also hard for me to say what is missing from the book, and I very much agree with Stefania that a vocabulary is unlimited in a way. So I would like to address not what is missing and not new words that we need to bring, but how we reinvent the words we use in growth-centric societies. And what they would mean in degrowth, so that, to put it very roughly, it does not become an empty signifier or so that it’s not used in very narrow all-too-straightforward ways.

I would like to start with the most used definition of degrowth, the very first lines that you come across when you search for it online. That definition says that ‘degrowth is an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that will reduce societies’ throughput of energy and raw materials’. It doesn’t come across as the main one in the book, but does everywhere else. I can see how this definition works in the ecological economics context and what is in mind there, but when it’s used for broader audiences – academic or non-academic – it can be misleading in many ways. If not explained exactly what is meant, it comes across as an individualist middle class western notion, as if you should basically reduce your consumption. And this is a critique that I have come across very often from leftist communities. This definition also downplays the broader agenda that degrowth has and which is very much present in the *Vocabulary* and other discussions. It might also spark some anxieties. If we talk about downscaling, then what is downscaled and how? Does all production need to be downscaled and who decides upon it? It would be nice – and you do it in the book – if this definition comes with an explanation and isn’t the primary lines that you read when you come across degrowth.

**Giacomo D'Alisa (GD):** Indeed, this definition is too much quoted, and it's problematic. But note that we have given it up and it's not in the book.

**EC:** Now let's proceed to the issues of work. There are some proposals in the vocabulary around work, which would be in line with degrowth. Their concreteness, without rethinking the concept of work itself and the problematic aspects of modern work, actually makes them feel abstract. For example, a proposal of work-sharing in itself does not come across as a satisfactory universal proposal, even for degrowth, with many questions arising. What kind of work will be shared? Are these uninteresting, alienating and dehumanising jobs most of us do today, in societies where our worth is still defined thorough work? Or is it some other idea of work that we have in mind? A broad comment would be that a lot of work today is alienating, deskilling, but at the same time our societies are very work-centric, so your worth is still defined through the work that you do and sometimes the very fact of being engaged in paid work. At the same time, we shouldn't necessarily discharge work and see the solution in getting rid of and doing less of it. There can, of course, be some meaning and dignity in work. So how can work be reclaimed or reconceptualised in degrowth? I don't have the answer to it and think this is something that needs to be thought through. I very much sympathise with Kropotkin's point that work should not be split into manual and knowledge or 'brain' work, and that the two should come together, and that the wholeness of work should be realised this way. But I think it's not enough and needs to be engaged with more.

The concept of consumption is also important and is addressed to some extent in the book, in the social limits of growth chapter. But consumption is mainly understood as positional consumption or maybe conspicuous consumption, status consumption. This is surely a very important part of modern consumption, but there are other gratifications that you can find from consuming. There can be super-conspicuous consumption, for example, when you are not trying to impress anyone, but by being discreet in consumer choices still engage in consumerism. Or there can be hedonist gratifications from consumption, for example, from the smells and the tastes of the things that are consumed – traditional hedonism it's called. Or modern hedonism would be in gratification from consumption of experiences that can be even not necessarily pleasant, but still you do engage in those. So it would be important for degrowth to understand consumption better by engaging with those various forms it.

At the same time, consumerism is a big problem of our societies and something that is maybe desired by many who cannot have access to it. Bauman was famously saying about the London riots that happened in 2011 that these were unsatisfied consumers claiming their dissatisfaction. However, even if we are not

consumerist, a lot of consumption that we engage in on a daily basis is actually unsustainable and unjust. Ecological unsustainability of consumption you would all probably immediately connect to and this is something that comes up a lot in the degrowth literature, with things being transported around the world and so on. The point that consumption is unjust is probably implicit in degrowth, but maybe can be stressed more. Basically this is the old Marxist critique that the politics of consumption is rooted in production, and that we forget about production and labour that has gone into the objects that we consume. At the same time, how would we think about consumption that would be in line with degrowth? Because a lot of things we do is consumption – it existed before capitalism, during capitalism and will stay after. If we arrive hopefully to sustainable degrowth societies, consumption will be there, but in different forms.

Finally, a very brief point on degrowth and academia. A lot of degrowth discussion comes from academic contexts, of course with the intention to go beyond them. But academia has lots of problems. One can argue that it is itself aimed at growth – acceleration, with lots of things that you need to produce, ‘publish or perish’ and all those. Often the stuff that comes out is not necessarily so interesting or revelational, but it needs to be there, showing one has produced. At the same time, the publishing industry is an important case because it is oriented towards growth – actually some scholars in critical management studies have been investigating this – and often has profit margins of 70%. So as degrowth scholars, how do we engage with academia, where do we start? Or maybe this is not the most important issue to work on and other important issues are more urgent? I do not know also, but this is a point to bring up.

**AP:** Thank you. Would you like to comment on the things that were brought up here?

**GK:** I will comment very quickly, I think these were both excellent comments, I fully endorse them. Just two points, I think. First, on the history of growth. There are books coming out on this, by Matthias Schmelzer on the hegemony of growth in the OECD and by Gareth Dale, a manuscript in progress about the genesis of growth from the ancient times through to capitalism. And then there’s of course the work already published by Timothy Mitchell on economentality and the invention of the economy, e.g. the chapters in his book *Carbon democracy*.

As for work, consumption, academia – these are definitely things we need to think about. The concept of work, for example, is the one we struggled with a lot in the degrowth group in Barcelona trying to think how we understand work. Consumption also. They are areas for new research.



**GD:** Just one quick thing on the aspect of publishing and academia. In all other languages the book is in creative commons, so it is open for download to everybody. So in Spanish, Catalan, French, Dutch, German and so on – they are all in creative commons, after a certain period of time from the publication.

**GK:** Ok, to say a little bit about the definition, because I'm partly responsible for it. Not partly, fully, because I am the one who wrote it [everyone laughs]. Giacomo, who is my co-editor and friend, and co-author, has fried me for that. He constantly says 'no, this is an awful definition, why did you write it, don't cite it'. It's not a surprise to hear this is a terrible definition. So what this definition says is that we should downscale our production and consumption for ecological reasons, to put it very simply. Yes, it's too reductionist a definition, and it comes from a time back in 2008 when we very much focused on ecological economic debates and we were trying to argue that if we are to reduce carbon emissions and material throughput then we should downscale economic activity, that is production and consumption.

But there is a *but* here. Oftentimes this critique against the idea that we should reduce our production and consumption, especially from the leftist circles that Katya [EC] mentioned, comes with a kind of agnosticism that I find problematic. For example, it's very common in eco-socialist circles to say 'yes, we should degrow dirty things but we can grow the right types of things'. Or that growth is just a problem of capitalism that brings growth of bad types of things but if only we could have a rational planned or a more democratic economy, then we would produce and consume the nice things, and then there wouldn't be a problem with growth whatsoever.

So I always feel there is a need for saying something about 'less' too – slowing down, producing and consuming less. I don't know how to say it, but I think it should be there in our definitions, because I think if it's not there and degrowth is simply an 'opening up of alternatives' then we are missing something crucial. Yes, we should decolonise our imaginary from the capitalist ideology of growth, we all agree. But then what? But what about socialist growth or eco-socialist growth? I have good anarchist friends from the peer-to-peer or the commons community who somehow imagine that magically a decentralised production will increase production ad infinitum too, without using more and more materials, or more and more energy. I think it is crucial in our definitions to keep the idea that production and consumption should and will decrease, the question is how to redistribute this equally and make sure that everyone has access to a decent standard of living that is attainable with the resources that we currently have.

So the consensus we arrived at with Giacomo was this elephant-snail picture – we captured it graphically, degrowth is both about less and different, the two go together. Art lets us explain ourselves a little bit better. Degrowth is a snail, though I am not sure you can quote this in an academic paper. But yes, I agree, don't cite again the definition from our 2010 article with François Schneider and Joan Martínez Alier. Use another definition, such as the ones we provide in this book, for example.

**EC:** I guess it is most important to articulate that degrowth is against productivism, but it doesn't mean that all production will need to be downscaled. Basically, sure, some things will grow, good things will grow, but the growth of production should not be an end in itself. And I guess it would be hard to disagree with it.

**GK:** Another word that we agree is missing from our vocabulary is the 'state'. So the floor to Giacomo. Why do you think we miss it?

**GD:** First of all, different translations include some different keywords each. The community that translates the book decides which words are relevant in their country or they think that are missing. For instance, for the French edition, there are at least five new entries, including the one on the state. Second, the point of bringing the state into the discussion is to articulate the question of transformation – and not just transition – intervening not just locally, but on different scales. However, I would admit that the triad 'power, capital and state' – this is the most problematic issue that we have not dealt with adequately as a degrowth community. I don't mean that we should select one theory or one political position, because it's really an open discussion, how you define power, for example. But the debate is ongoing and questions like our understanding of the state and its transformation will be coming up in the community.

**AP:** Ok, Stefania, do you want to add something to this discussion?

**SB:** Yes, if I may, I would just take a couple of extra minutes to say something we've not discussed so far and that I think is important. In my opinion we should see this as pretty much a western vocabulary. We have to be aware that we are not the only ones who contest growth. Degrowth can be articulated in other languages and there are other words that may express very similar worldviews. One of them is, for example, 'buen vivir' – a concept from Latin America. Because otherwise we would reproduce this paradigm by which in order to be an environmentalist, in order to be concerned about ecology, you have to grow rich first, and then you will automatically develop a sense of the need for protecting the environment or whatever.

This is really a tale that we have been told repeatedly and that, of course, the whole environmental justice movement has contested, and I think it's important that we don't reproduce it in the degrowth debate. We have to be aware that we are not alone, that there are a lot of people who are contesting economic growth – for example, the indigenous and the peasant communities that have been negatively affected by development politics in different forms, by being dispossessed or impoverished or contaminated. Because what we need to have very clear is that growth is a zero-sum game and whenever growth is produced, someone somewhere else is impoverished and some ecosystem is destroyed etcetera. So I think we should really enlarge this vocabulary into a more transcultural vocabulary that allows for other ways of conceptualising degrowth without imposing the 'degrowth' word.

**GD:** Exactly, and actually in the book, the last session is devoted to keywords from other paradigms and other parts of the world, and 'buen vivir' is one of them. We call this section 'alliances'. We recognise that there are not only other languages, but other traditions that are even stronger than ours, so we want to create these alliances. One is with the 'economy of permanence', a Gandhian legacy. Then there is 'buen vivir' and 'feminist economics'. We recognise these examples of alliances are few, this is why we are open to new possibilities.

**SB:** Another point is this: in the perspective of the 'social limits to growth' what sustains the desire for growth in wealthy economies is precisely the dream of access to positional goods. I think this is only part of the story. The bigger part of the story, in my opinion, is that growth in affluent societies is made necessary – and thus socially, not just individually, desirable – via its association with employment and welfare, which surpass the relevance of positional consumption. This becomes even more clear in times of economic crisis. Growth is generally reputed as desirable at the social level, because it's associated with all the public goods that we as citizens of wealthy countries enjoy. This is why everybody wants economic growth, because they want employment, because without employment they don't have money to access basic needs, but they also want public services, which are related to the rate of economic growth in the country. When growth declines, public expenditure is cut down. So we need to tackle, and to break, this correlation of welfare and growth, and discuss how degrowth could bring the former.

**AP:** Very good comments. I'm sure they can be discussed much further, but let's open up this discussion for questions.\*

**QR:** As an eco-socialist, what we see today as the limit is capitalism itself. Isn't it the basic critique of capitalism that it doesn't provide growth any more? Maybe instead of trying to dig into degrowth as a principle, we should go into growth as such and contest the definition of growth, giving it a class analysis, a historical analysis and making a critique of that. Not to put the idea of growth away, but just as, for example, democracy, put class analysis of democracy and reclaim this notion. The concept of degrowth for me is very problematic because it goes together very much with the concept of austerity.

**GK:** We think growth is the problem. Capitalist growth is a problem, socialist growth or 'really existing socialist growth' was a problem too. Any conceivable imaginaries geared around the notion of growth are problematic. The minimum thesis of degrowth is precisely that we are not accepting growth under no circumstances, our minimum line, the 'declaracion de minimos' as the Indignadas movement would call its minimum demands.

Socialism or whatever anti-capitalist imaginary we create has to escape from the terms of the debate produced by capitalism. So growth, the imaginary of growth, is something that capitalism has produced, and we are caught into the same imaginary if we are framing the problem as just one of restriction of growth. We are arguing we should turn the debate completely on its head and say we do have enough, it just needs to be redistributed. And we've had enough for 50 or 60 years now. Galbraith wrote this back in the 50s. The US was already affluent, the problem was that resources were directed from public to private consumption. We have more than enough. The problem is that the 99% is excluded, but it's excluded in relative terms, not in absolute terms. The point is not to grow the pie so that the 99% is taking more. The pie that there is, give it to the 99%.

Now to austerity. I know there's the danger of the two discourses being mixed. There are friends from Germany that tell us the conservatives are using similar discourses to degrowth, and there are some scholars, who are on the line, they might talk about degrowth, but then also endorse conservative austerity discourses. We are definitely not in that camp, and there is a very fundamental difference. Arguments for austerity are always made in the name of growth. I've never heard a conservative politician making an argument for austerity that is not

---

\* All questions were taken from the audience during the discussion, without a chance to engage with them within the session itself due to time constraints. Some of these questions were addressed by the participants afterwards, with responses appearing for the first time in the edited version of the roundtable.

in the name of growth. In Greece the neoliberal argument is that we consume more than we produce, which might sound similar to degrowth, but it is not, because degrowth is not saying that we consume more than we produce but that our consumption in the global north is destroying other parts of the world and the climate. The neoliberal discourse instead says decrease your (public) consumption so that you have more surplus and you can grow and produce more. This actually is the very same argument Malthus was making, this is the argument conservatives have always been making. Austerity is in line with the mindset of growth, that's why precisely we have to go outside of this mentality. If we say we need to produce more for the 99%, the neoliberals and the mainstream economists will tell you 'of course, we are with you, guys, so tighten your belt a little bit for the time being, so that your kids will have more'. That has always been the argument. If Merkel comes out and says, 'ok, we need to be austere because we don't want to create commodity frontiers in Africa, or emit too much carbon emissions', then ok, let's discuss then if degrowth has been co-opted by conservatives.

**SB:** I don't see that coming [laughs].

**GK:** I don't see that coming either, that's precisely my point. But if it comes, then let's discuss it as a real problem, otherwise now it is just a theoretical speculation. There is of course a real problem – that degrowth or seemingly degrowth discourses can be used to support conservative or xenophobic narratives. This is what we are trying to do by developing a vocabulary – formulating the degrowth discourse in an open, yet also a clear and limited way so that it doesn't allow intentional misunderstandings and this type of co-optation. This is precisely why I am concerned with trying to explore how to talk about limits without Malthus, how to talk about degrowth without talking about austerity. This is precisely what this vocabulary is all about.

**Q2:** In what ways can the concept of degrowth be translated into public policy?

**GD:** In the Spanish version of the book, there is a part with ten policy proposals that Giorgos wrote together with the Research and Degrowth group. These were published in 10-15 different newspapers around the world. For the Spanish version, we asked some politicians to comment on those policies, so we have a section on those policies and the discussion of politicians of these policies – well, not often a great discussion.

**EC:** Public policy in line with degrowth could potentially be implemented at both municipal and state levels. But particular contexts need to be taken into account and probably it would be hard to come up with a universal set of policies. For

example, proposals like work-sharing from the ten policy proposals Giacomo mentions might work for particular contexts, but, as I mentioned earlier, would not necessarily substantially improve work itself or add meaning to it. At the same time, proposals like basic income or shorter working week, also included into the ten proposals and discussed beyond degrowth too, can be appealing for quite a wide range of contexts, especially if these policies do not make us worse off. For example, so that basic income does not come as a substitute to welfare provisions. In general though, there is scope for much more discussion of degrowth in policy-making. In our degrowth group at Lund we found it tricky to discuss policies as for degrowthers they may seem to be not that groundbreaking, whilst for those involved in policy-making they would already sound too radical.

**Q3:** Do you conceive of a degrowth in an operationalisable way at the level of states, or is it something inherently transnational?

**GK:** Any serious transformation in a single country is limited by the fact that we live in a globalised world, and that a country which will dare to differ will be punished by fleeing capital, undermining its project at its genesis (witness Greece), unless it conforms to the basic dictates of capital (witness the Latin American pink revolution which continued the extractivist model and retained the position of these countries in the global division of labour). It is though much easier to say that transformation has to be transnational and internationalist than to actually think what it means or how to do it. We need to think better and more seriously and rigorously the different scales of a degrowth transition, we are indeed focusing too much on either the nation state or the local community.

**Q4:** Some marketeers and public relations houses make a very clear claim that you don't repeat the argument of your enemy at any time. So when you want to counter-spin something, you explicitly don't articulate the message that is out there so as not to end up advertising competitor inadvertently. Is it part of the discussion you've been having?

**GK:** We've discussed this a lot as a group in Barcelona, we read Lakoff's *Don't think of an elephant!* and all the rest. The sense of the group is that we should stick to what we believe is the truth, and name the truth with its name, rather than try to spin things around. We want to appeal to the common senses of people and awaken dormant common senses, but we don't want to 'counterspin' anything. We don't like the term 'marketing' degrowth. Many of us have been involved in the past with environmental NGOs who have tried to 'market' environmentally responsible behaviour and have failed utterly. We are also not totally convinced that naming the enemy backfires. Marx, after all, called his book

... *Capital*. Finally, we have to remember that the purpose of degrowth was always subversive – ‘de’ subverts growth and calls into question the desire for growth, in a way that no other ‘positive’ (sic) alternative would ever do. The ‘de’ also is a useful reminder to friends who dream now of a communist (or anarchist) luxury, based on digital fabricators and peer-to-peer commons, that they forget that they too will have to fuel and feed these fabricators with materials. Where will these materials come from and at whose cost? Degrowth signals that communal luxury will be a luxury of less, a luxury of what Latouche called ‘frugal abundance’.

**Q5:** Can seven billion people understand that they have to consume less, they have to want less?

**GK:** We believe the great majority of people can understand it, but either cannot act on their understanding given structural constraints (this holds for ourselves too), or do not want to act because they are in a position of privilege and fear change. At the same time, a lot of initiatives in line with degrowth are already happening.

**Q6:** Who is the subject of degrowth and what is he or she like?

**GD:** This is very interesting, the political or anthropological subject of degrowth. And this is one of those problematic themes that we as editors avoided engaging as much as we should have had in the book.

**EC:** I agree this is a very important question to address. Being reminded the other day of Fromm’s *To have or to be?*, I thought degrowth can learn from him. The subject of degrowth would be someone living in the mode of being. It is important to switch to a non-consumerist life and not to see ourselves through what we ‘have’, which I think is very much implied in degrowth discussions. However, Fromm’s mode of being goes beyond this as the mode of having is not only about consumption, but goes into the way we relate to other people, approach friendship, love, the way we communicate. So even if we are not consumerist, but this having mode in other forms still shapes who we are, it would probably not take us that far from the way we live now.

**Q7:** Discussion of ecological footprint – to me it’s Malthusian. How can we talk about ecological footprint without Malthus?

**GK:** The ecological footprint is just – an imperfect – measure of how much land is needed to sustain your current pattern of consumption. It is not Malthusian or anti-Malthusian. It may be framed in a Malthusian way if one argues that we are running out of ecological space for our footprint and that this is because the poor

are having too many kids or consume too much, and that therefore we should remove all poor relief and welfare support. This is what Malthus argued, but I don't see anyone in the degrowth community arguing anything remotely similar. What we are arguing is that the material and carbon footprint of wealthy nations has kept increasing hand in hand with economic growth and at the expense of the ecological space of the rest of the world. The footprint frame lets us see the hidden flows of materials and energy from other parts of the world that support our lifestyles and which are disguised in domestic statistics that give a false impression of 'decoupling' between growth and resource use.

**Q8:** One of the starting points in degrowth debate is the myth of decoupling. Looking on the figures on international energy, now there is evidence of absolute decoupling.

**GK:** In 2015 global GDP increased and carbon emissions declined. But this happened 10 times more in the past 40 years, this is not the first time carbon emissions decline while global GDP grows. True, the other times this happened there were regional crises (e.g. the collapse of the Soviet Union, etc), and while global GDP grew emissions in some parts of the world fell dramatically. But are we sure that the decline this year is not because of the lingering effects of recession and anemic growth rates in many parts of the world?

Note also that it would be crazy if as degrowthers we argued that GDP can never decouple from carbon emissions. If carbon emissions are to get down to zero by 2100, which they should if we are to avoid catastrophic climate change, then there must be decoupling, unless someone argues that the economy also should cease to produce anything. We are not arguing this, and we of course allow for the replacement of fossil fuels with alternative forms of energy as well as for improvements in the efficiency with which we use energy. All we are saying is that reducing carbon emissions will be much easier with less economic production than with more. And that renewables can only support a smaller rather than a larger economy.

**Q9:** Do politicians actually want growth or do they want something else? Isn't it more about political power rather than economic growth?

**GK:** The politicians who represent the elites want first and foremost to secure and protect the profits and positions of the privileged. This is easier with growth than without. Having failed that, and in the absence of growth, austerity is the best option for them, squeezing out more for the rich from the diminishing pie. Their hope is that growth will recover soon with austerity, since they know that



with austerity alone, social conditions will sooner or later explode. It is important to expose the logic of power and who is in charge, yes.

**EC:** It's probably about both political power and economic growth. We can say economic growth is pushed by the elites and groups with power, as well as politicians representing them, but it is also so embedded into the institutions of the society that if politicians sympathetic to degrowth happen to come to power, it may be not enough to change institutions framed by the discourse of economic growth.

**QIO:** Degrowth should challenge not only growth, but also related issues like money and free trade agreements.

**GK:** Yes, and many other things too – patriarchy, colonialism, property institutions, the credit system, etc. We just think growth is a focal point for thinking and rethinking how to challenge other forms and expressions of injustice and domination.

**AP:** I agree. Both money and free trade are abstractions that obscure the exploitative relations between capital and labour, and also between capital and nature. This has been discussed extensively in Marxist literature, so I won't go into it here. But growth is also an abstraction and it cannot be observed or studied ethnographically, although it has material manifestations and implications that can be scrutinised. So money and growth are similar, in a sense they are unintended consequences of purposeful actions. For example, when we use money, we inadvertently reproduce money as an economic and social institution. Growth follows the same logic. The more we buy and sell things and services to each other for money, the larger the economy becomes and the more growth rates increase. But growth is then actually an unintended consequence of everyday actions. The problem is that this unintended consequence has been elevated to an overarching political objective, while the social and ecological problems associated with it have been marginalised. Unlike money, where the social costs of creating more money is widely accepted (in terms of increased inflation), and where more debt is known to reproduce social hierarchies and class divisions, the social and ecological costs of increasing growth rates are still very much obscured by the abstraction that growth is. Even though money and free trade are crucial to criticise, and have been so for decades, growth has received far less attention, despite involving huge social and ecological costs.

**QII:** There tends to be a linear perception of time in degrowth, unlike, for example, in *buen vivir*. Have you reflected on this?

**GK:** It is a valid criticism that degrowth is stuck to the modernist and Western perception of a linear time. As I have argued elsewhere though (in my article ‘The utopianism of degrowth’ with Hug March) the spatio-temporal dialectics of degrowth are interesting. The idea is that we take seeds from the past to produce the future now. Think, for example, of urban gardens. These are a commons. Commons is an idea coming from the pre-capitalist past. But at the same time when we are working on an urban garden in common we are prefiguring a different future, now and in a concrete space. The linear evolution of time where the future follows the past and is an improvement of it, somewhat breaks down in this way. I don’t think it becomes a circle though, and maybe that’s fine.

**Q12:** Is there a dialogue between degrowth and alternatives to mainstream development notions? Is growth needed for the developing world?

**GK:** What we say is that growth is unsustainable and that there are alternatives, and that we should struggle to make them flourish. In the global south (to make an awful overgeneralisation), the point is to give the opportunity to indigenous alternatives to flourish. Degrowth in the global north, both in the material sense of using less materials and energy, and in the imaginary sense of decolonising the dominant imaginary from growth, only stands to make this more possible. Relational living and transformational agro-ecology are forms of degrowth. They do not fit a growth economy or growth mentality. We are far from closing opportunities of dialogue between degrowth and alternative cosmovisions from other parts of the world that challenge the idea of a one-way future consisting only of growth. The last part of our book on alliances was devoted to such alternatives (though it was admittedly short).

**GD:** Of course what we’re arguing is not degrowth for people in other parts of the world. This is very basic for me. I would say, once we have already won the battle, all the people should be able to satisfy their very basic needs. So we will mobilise all the resources necessary to do that. But then I don’t think we should fall down on this idea of selective growth – i.e. what or who has to grow selectively – I think this is very problematic. The idea is global environmental justice, that is the point.

**A comment from the audience:** The whole debate on degrowth to my mind would profit from being more on the offensive in terms of framing itself as a movement for global justice, because that’s what it’s eventually about. To me it’s of course an ecological question – we can’t consume as many resources as we consume – but the reason why we can’t do that is that 80% of humanity can’t. I want everyone to be able to enjoy the same things, and I cannot justify doing things that are not available to everyone. And that I think should be at least one

of the core motivations. I think it would make sense to make these social elements stronger, because it's also a strong argument in response to claims that degrowth is not looking, for example, at the class question. We are and we are doing it at a global level.

**GK:** Good point. Indeed, this is the way we should be framing degrowth.

**AP:** Ok, thank you all for coming and for an interesting discussion.

## references<sup>\*</sup>

- Bauman, Z. (2011) 'The London riots – On consumerism coming home to roost', *Social Europe*, 9 August. [<https://www.socialeurope.eu/2011/08/the-london-riots-on-consumerism-coming-home-to-roost/>]
- D'Alisa, G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (2015) *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era*. London: Routledge.
- Dobson, A. (2007/1990) *Green political thought*. London: Routledge.
- Fromm, E. (2013/1976) *To have or to be?* London: Bloomsbury.
- Galbraith, J.K. (1998/1958) *The affluent society*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Kallis, G. and H. March (2015) 'Imaginarities of hope: The utopianism of degrowth', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 105(2): 360-368.
- Kallis, G. and Research & Degrowth (2015) 'Yes, we can prosper without growth: 10 Policy proposals for the new left', *The Press Project*, 7 January. [<https://theleapblog.org/yes-we-can-prosper-without-growth-10-policy-proposals-for-the-new-left/>]
- Kropotkin, P. (1998/1898) *Fields, factories and workshops tomorrow*. London: Freedom Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2004) *Don't think of an elephant!: Know your values and frame the debate*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Latouche, S. (2011) *Vers une société d'abondance frugale: Contresens et controverses sur la décroissance*. Paris: Mille et une nuits.
- Lilley, S. (2012) 'How publishers feather their nests on open access to public money', *The Times Higher Education*, 1 November.

---

\* Under references, the various sources mentioned by the participants of this discussion have been gathered.

[<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/how-publishers-feather-their-nests-on-open-access-to-public-money/421672.article>]

Massey, D. (2013) 'Neoliberalism has hijacked our vocabulary', *The Guardian*, 11 June.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/11/neoliberalism-hijacked-vocabulary>]

Mitchell, T. (2011) *Carbon democracy: Political power in the age of oil*. London: Verso.

Schmelzer, M. (2016) *The hegemony of growth. The OECD and the making of the economic growth paradigm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schneider, F., G. Kallis and J. Martinez Alier (2010) 'Crisis or opportunity? Economic degrowth for social equity and ecological sustainability', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 18(6): 511-518.

## **the authors**

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya is a researcher in degrowth and critical management studies and a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*. She was a co-coordinator of the Degrowth theme at the Pufendorf Institute for Advanced Studies at Lund University (2015-2016).

Email: [ekaterina@ephemerajournal.org](mailto:ekaterina@ephemerajournal.org)

Alexander Paulsson is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Swedish Knowledge Centre For Public Transport. He was a co-coordinator of the Degrowth theme at the Pufendorf Institute for Advanced Studies at Lund University (2015-2016).

Email: [alexander.paulsson@vti.se](mailto:alexander.paulsson@vti.se)

Giorgos Kallis is an ecological economist and political ecologist, member of Research and Degrowth Barcelona.

Email: [giorgoskallis@gmail.com](mailto:giorgoskallis@gmail.com)

Stefania Barca is an environmental historian and political ecologist. She was a guest researcher in the Degrowth theme at the Pufendorf Institute for Advanced Studies at Lund University (2015-2016).

Email: [sbarca@ces.uc.pt](mailto:sbarca@ces.uc.pt)

Giacomo D'Alisa is an ecological economist and political ecologist, member of Research and Degrowth Barcelona.

Email: [giacomo\\_dalisa@yahoo.it](mailto:giacomo_dalisa@yahoo.it)