

In Movement, Strengthening Alternatives and Overcoming Growth, Competition and Profit

About the authors and their positions

We write this text as editors and coordinators of the project *Degrowth in Movement(s)* with Dennis Eversberg. We see ourselves as part of the degrowth movement in Germany and Europe. Corinna Burkhart first discovered degrowth during her studies through an internship at *Research & Degrowth* and has been working for *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*¹ since 2014. Dennis Eversberg is a sociologist and scientific collaborator at the DFG-funded Research Group on *Post-Growth Societies* at the University of Jena, where he studies the social composition, motivations and practices within the degrowth movement. Matthias Schmelzer is an economic historian and activist who works as a scientific collaborator at the University of Zürich and as a freelance collaborator at *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*. Nina Treu cofounded *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie* in 2011 in Leipzig and has been carrying out work related to degrowth since 2014.

This text only answers questions 1 and 2 of the project. Questions 3, 4 and 5 are planned to be answered in autumn 2016 after a collective evaluation process with the authors in order to complete the general goal of the project.

1. What is the key idea of degrowth?

Overcoming growth, competition and profit – for a social-ecological and globally fair economy and way of life

The guiding economic and social principle of ‘higher, further, faster’ forces us into a social order of permanent competition in all areas of life. On the one hand, this leads to imperatives of social acceleration that overwhelm and exclude a great many people. On the other hand, this obsession with economic maximization is destroying the natural basis of human life and the ecosystems of plants and animals.

Degrowth represents a transformative path towards forms of economic activity and social (self-)organization centred on the welfare of all human beings and the preservation of the ecological basis of life. This requires both a fundamentally different way of interacting with each other on a daily basis as well as a profound cultural transformation, and the overcoming of capitalist ways of production with their imperatives of competition, growth and profit. Degrowth is not a finished model or plan that can be designed and then implemented –it is far more about re-politicizing the main aspects of our lives and economies in order to jointly conceive, test and fight for alternatives. The common values of this transformation are awareness, solidarity and cooperation. The goal: a life of dignity and self-determination for all human beings. And to make this possible, it is necessary to develop social

¹ Roughly ‘Laboratory for New Economic Ideas’

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Release date:

13.12.2016

www.degrowth.de/en/dim

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practices and concepts in which humans see themselves as part of the planetary ecosystem and live accordingly.

Degrowth is a movement explicitly focused on the highly industrialised countries of the Global North, even though social movements from the Global South are important allies and partners –for example, those discussions shaped by indigenous traditions such as *buen vivir*, post-extractivism and the grassroots ecological movements of the poor. Rich countries must reduce their consumption of raw materials, resources and land, as well as their emissions and waste production, to a level that is sustainable in the long run and that allows the countries in the South to have equal access to development opportunities.

Alternatives envisioned by the degrowth movement

The following concepts for an alternative society are central to the degrowth movement:

- A focus on a good life for all and therefore on the satisfaction of concrete human needs. This includes concepts such as slowness, ‘time prosperity’² and conviviality, in other words, quality in human relationships and the greatest possible freedom from all forms of domination.
- An emphasis on the changeability of social orders and an orientation towards sufficiency – instead of a fixation on technological novelties and increased efficiency– as strategies for solving ecological problems. From the point of view of degrowth, the idea that it is possible to completely decouple economic growth from the use of resources has been refuted by history and is technologically and politically unrealistic. This makes it necessary to search for alternatives beyond the concepts of ecological modernization and green growth.
- A truly collective political process to decide what products and services there should be more of and –especially– what there should be less of in the future. From the degrowth perspective, areas which could be dismantled are e.g. the fossil-fuel and industrial sectors, the military, the arms industry and the advertising sector, and individual and air transport. Areas that could be expanded, on the other hand are e.g. social and collective infrastructures, an ecological circular economy, decentralised and renewable energy sources existing as commons, care work, education and a solidarity economy.
- A redistribution of income and wealth on a national and global level, and a transformation of social security systems. In addition to an unconditional basic income –not only as money, but also in the form of

² Approximate translation of the German term ‘Zeitwohlstand’

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social infrastructure— many are demanding a maximum wage.

- A focus on the reproduction of life, where the production and processing of goods is subordinate to human welfare, instead of the other way around. A potential first step in this sense would be a radical reduction in wage labour for all.
- Freedom from the one-sided Western development paradigm, in order to enable a self-determined shaping of society and a good life in the Global South.
- An expansion of democratic forms of decision-making in all areas, including the economy, in order to enable true political participation. Testing and practising of grassroots and consensus-oriented processes are fundamental to the movement.
- Regionally-based, but also open and interconnected economic circles. Because international trade deepens social divisions and prevents ecological sustainability, it is necessary to move towards a deglobalization of economic relations. However, degrowth does not stand for cultural isolation, homogenous 'bioregions', or economic protectionism for the sake of competitiveness, but for open forms of democratic relocalisation.

All these elements share the central idea that changes towards a socially just and ecologically sustainable society and economy at a global level are only possible through a combination of different strategies: In this sense, science and research are just as important as activism and practical projects that seek to provide alternatives in the here and now.

Degrowth is also far more than just a criticism of economic growth —it is about creating the conditions for a good life for everybody. Thus, conservative, racist-nationalist and sexist currents of thought that also criticise growth go against the essence of degrowth and its fundamental orientation towards a good life and equal rights and freedoms for all human beings worldwide; there is no place for them in degrowth.

A brief history of the degrowth movement

Now an international movement, the beginnings of degrowth can be found in France in the early 2000s. However, the concept of economic growth has been the subject of criticism for almost as long as it has existed. Since the 1970s, both the widely-read study, *The Limits of Growth* (1972), and the work of a wide range of intellectuals and economists such as André Gorz, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen or Claudia von Werlhof have contributed significantly to the development of this current of thought.

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In 2002, the publication in France of a special edition of the magazine *Silence* on the subject of *décroissance* (French for ‘degrowth’) sparked a new wave of debate surrounding the criticism of growth; and the first International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity took place in Paris in 2008. During the conference the English word ‘degrowth’ was used, leading to its subsequent adoption in the international scientific debate. After this, [international conferences on degrowth](#) took place in Barcelona in 2010, in Venice in 2012 and in Leipzig in 2014. Since the first conference in 2008, the number of attendees has risen continuously and has included scientists from a wide range of areas as well as activists and practitioners. The conferences are a meeting point and a place of debate, learning and networking for the degrowth movement; and at the same time, they provide it with greater public attention. So far, the most important events for the degrowth movement in the German-speaking countries have been the degrowth conference in Leipzig in 2014 with more than 3000 participants, the *Beyond Growth?! congress* in Berlin in 2011 organised by *Attac*, and the recently created Degrowth Summer School, which took place for the second time in 2016 at the Climate Camp in the German Rhineland.³

2. Who is part of the movement for degrowth, what do they do?

Critical self-reflection as a path to anti-capitalism: socially homogenous, but diverse in its contents - and critical of capitalism

The degrowth movement in Germany is highly decentralised, and has neither a formal network nor an organizing centre. Rather it is composed of a great diversity of individual and collective actors.

There are, firstly, certain organizations that work directly in the context of the degrowth movement, for example the *Netzwerk Wachstumswende* together with the *Förderverein Wachstumswende*⁴, or the *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*, which maintains the German [degrowth web portal](#) and initiates and supports projects listed there. Since the *Beyond Growth?! congress* in Berlin in 2011, there has also been an *Attac* working group with the same name that is active throughout Germany –and some local *Attac* groups work on the subject as well. In addition to these relatively large or well-known groups and institutions, there are also many smaller, generally local, actors working in the area of growth criticism and alternatives to growth. This has become especially apparent thanks to the positive response to the degrowth conference in Leipzig in 2014 and the wide range of events it hos-

³ A more complete history of the degrowth movement can be found on the degrowth website at: <http://www.degrowth.de/en/a-history-of-degrowth/>

⁴ Roughly ‘Network for a Reversal of Growth’ and ‘Association for the Reversal of Growth’, respectively

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ted. Furthermore, a variety of individuals or departments in other large organizations not solely focused on degrowth, such as political foundations and environmental organizations, also contribute actively to the degrowth debate through events, participation in discussions, or publications. Finally, many ecologically-oriented economists also study the subject of degrowth, particularly in the context of the *Vereinigung für ökologische Ökonomie (VÖÖ)* (German Society for Ecological Economics) and the *Vereinigung für ökologische Wirtschaftsforschung (VÖW)* (German Association for Ecological Economic Research). Last but not least, the *Institut für ökologische Wirtschaftsforschung (IÖW)* (Institute for Ecological Economy Research) maintains the blog www.postwachstum.de, and since 2008 the University of Oldenburg has regularly hosted lecture series on the post-growth economy.

On the whole, the greatest amount of progress in the degrowth movement has been achieved thanks to the large, grassroots organizational teams involved in the international degrowth conference 2014 in Leipzig and the Degrowth Summer Schools in 2015 and 2016 in the lignite-mining region of the German Rhineland.

Degrowth in Europe

In addition to the above actors in the German degrowth movement, there has also been a growing degrowth movement in other regions, especially Southern Europe. For example, the international conferences started in Paris in 2008 were then continued by the group *Research & Degrowth (RGD)*, which is active in Spain and France. *RGD* works mainly in the area of science, is especially active in Barcelona and surroundings, and seeks to promote the dissemination of degrowth ideas in the academic world. In France, the movement mainly revolves around the periodicals *Silence* and *La Décroissance*; as well as the *Parti pour la Décroissance* ('Party for Degrowth'), which in addition to its political activities is also active in the dissemination of information. In Italy, the group *Rete per la decrescita* ('Network for Degrowth') conducts scientific research, whereas the *Movimento per la Decrescita Felice* ('Movement for Happy Degrowth'), strongly rooted in local groups, promotes the idea of voluntary simplicity and seeks to provide an example of an alternative, 'good practice'. Eastern European groups working for degrowth have received increased attention and acquired momentum thanks to the degrowth conference in autumn 2016 in Budapest. Furthermore, there is an ever-increasing range of research in addition to small-scale practical projects in various European countries (e.g. *Can Decreix*⁵ in France) related to a greater or lesser degree to degrowth.

Alliances and cooperation

In addition to the groups directly carrying out growth-critical work, there

⁵ Literally 'house of degrowth'

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are, both in Germany and in other regions of the global north, close ties with and within the alternative economies scene: commons, solidarity economies, transition towns, common good economies, sharing economies, plural economies, common gardens, free and swap shops, etc. – and often the borders between these movements and degrowth are not necessarily clear-cut. There are also noteworthy instances of cooperation with scientific institutes, development aid organizations and political foundations, and individual representatives of political parties.

Publishing and practicing

Degrowth is, on the one hand, a proposal for profound societal transformation; and in this sense, much of the work focuses on firing up social and academic debate through publications⁶, websites, events and conferences. On the other hand, degrowth is also the common element of a great many hands-on projects, where it manifests itself through concrete political and everyday practices. Thus, the large degrowth events are organised by grassroots organizational teams –the food is regional, organic and vegan and is prepared collectively, and financing comes exclusively from politically compatible organizations. Typical practices in degrowth circles are, for example: mobility that is as ecological as possible, cooperation with vegetable co-ops, living in common housing spaces or other alternative forms of living, and participation in direct actions.

The general consensus in the German degrowth movement

A survey carried out with participants at the degrowth conference in Leipzig in 2014 provides information on the ideas and ideals of those individuals that are practically active within the degrowth spectrum.⁷ The study shows that the people active in the degrowth scene are mainly from student, academic and urban middle-class circles; the majority are between 20 and 35 years old; most are *white*; and many of the younger individuals become politicised through degrowth. Irrespective of any other possible differences between them, the people that see themselves as part of the degrowth movement share a common, growth-critical vision. This vision can be summarised in general terms as follows:

“Growth without environmental destruction is an illusion. Therefore, economic shrinkage in the industrialized countries will be inevitable. This includes that we will have to abstain from certain amenities we have grown used to. The transformation towards a post-growth society needs to be peaceful and emerge from below; it amounts to overcoming capitalism, and female emancipation must be a central issue in the process”

⁶ A wide range of publications can be found in the media library of the degrowth website: <http://www.degrowth.de/en/media-library/>

⁷ Participation: 814 out of around 3000 participants.

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(see Eversberg/Schmelzer 2015).⁸

Currents in the post-growth discourse

At the same time, the growth-critical discourse is characterised by the heterogeneity of its contents. Still attempts to categorise the diverse actors critical of growth are made. In the German post-growth debate, it is possible to distinguish through the texts of certain key figures the *conservative* current, represented prominently by Meinhard Miegel, the *social-reformist* current, represented by Angelika Zahrnt, and the *sufficiency-oriented* current, personified mainly by Niko Paech. In addition, there are also *feminist* and *anti-capitalist* currents –although these, unlike the previous cases, revolve less around specific individuals. The differences mainly reflect typical positions found within the post-growth spectrum that can be read about in many books and articles. It is important to note, however, that the post-growth debate cannot be unequivocally equated with *degrowth* as a discourse and movement. For example, discussions and events in recent years have shown that in particular the conservative current of criticism à la Miegel is not reflected in the younger and more international degrowth scene.

Political and content-related currents in the degrowth movement

Another way of describing the range of contents and internal tensions within the degrowth movement is provided by the aforementioned survey, which reveals five main currents: Sufficiency-oriented Critics of Civilization, the moderate Immanent Reformers, a transitory group of Voluntarist-Pacifist Idealists, the Modernist Rationalist Left and the Alternative Practical Left (for a detailed overview see Eversberg/Schmelzer 2016). This shows the diversity within the degrowth movement with regard to, among other things:

- content and perspective (from a closeness to nature, to techno-optimism, to radical anti-capitalism);
- forms of organization (from large organizations, to alternative projects, to associations of activists);
- political practices (from petitions, to direct action, or even to dropping out of society altogether)
- political backgrounds (from a low level of politicization, to alternative circles, to the classic left-wing).

This breadth of interest provides the degrowth movement with a wide range of potential alliances and many degrowth activists also see themselves as a part of other movements and currents of thought –among others, those

⁸ This 'general consensus' is based on 7 of the 29 prepared statements in the questionnaire for which fewer than 100 of the 814 people interviewed had a position contrary to the majority opinion –there are therefore definitely some participants who would not agree with it in the form presented here.

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represented in the project *Degrowth in Movement(s)*. Degrowth is thus often seen as a common ground or platform; a collective space for both action and debate.

Links and Literature

Links

Degrowth-Webportal: <http://www.degrowth.de/>

Netzwerk Wachstumswende: <http://www.wachstumswende.de/>

Blog Postwachstum: <http://www.postwachstum.de/>

Research & Degrowth: <http://www.degrowth.org/>

Education methods “Endlich Wachstum”: <http://www.endlich-wachstum.de/>

Applied as well as further literature

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