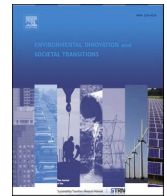




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# Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions

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## Book review

**The Case for Degrowth**, G. Kallis, S. Paulson, G. D'Alisa, F. Demaria. Polity Press (2020). ISBN: 978-1-509-53562-0, 140 pages

In *The Case for Degrowth*, leading degrowth scholars Giorgos Kallis, Giacomo D'Alisa and Federico Demaria collaborate with anthropologist Susan Paulson to 'motivate and empower citizens, policy-makers, and activists to reorient livelihoods and politics around equitable wellbeing' (p.5). This short, accessible book is published by Polity Press' 'The case for' series, which presents constructive, thought-provoking policy proposals to tackle a dysfunctional, crisis-prone economic system.

*The Case for Degrowth* begins with a brief presentation of the notion of degrowth—a form of society and economy that aims at ensuring the wellbeing of all and sustains the natural basis of life—followed by a discussion of the economic, environmental, and social costs of perpetual, compound economic growth. However, the book's primary contribution is its consolidation of ongoing debates on strategies for degrowth. As such, this book is in tune with the changing nature and 'maturation' of the degrowth debate, which during the last decade has slowly but steadily evolved from a focus on 'what is degrowth' and 'why degrowth?' to 'degrowth, how?'—i.e. the question of how to transform our societies in alignment with the vision of degrowth.

Although the first two diagnostic chapters are relatively brief and do not provide a comprehensive overview of the breadth of the degrowth debate, they—particularly in combination with the insightful FAQ section—highlight several well founded and concise critiques of the growth economy. These chapters convincingly explicate how economic growth policies produce the very social ills that they are supposed to cure, why growing economies do not decrease their ecological destructiveness (and why green growth is therefore a myth), and how the history of economic growth cannot be understood as a mere chronicle of technological progress, but rather must be read as a history of multiple social, political and ecological exploitations.

This emphasis on the entanglement of economic growth with the histories and structures of colonialism, racism, classism and sexism then informs the book's engagement with strategies for degrowth, whereby 'workers, feminists, anti-racists, and members of low-income communities' (p.98) are put forward as key allies, inspirations and leaders for change. Informed by feminist and post-colonial perspectives, the authors highlight the role of subjectivity within transformations beyond mere propositions of lifestyle changes. Moving away from Western dualisms and dichotomies (humans vs. nature, men vs. women, what is knowledge vs. what is not) is deemed necessary as part of a transition to truly sustainable societies. Within this perspective, the authors refuse to consider grassroots initiatives as mere innovative niches that must scale upward and outward to become valuable agents in sustainability transitions. Throughout the book, a central role is given to *commoning*, 'the process through which people collaboratively create, sustain, and enjoy shared resources via communication, regulation, mutual support, conflict negotiation, and experimentation' (p.17). Through the lens of this concept, the book interweaves the different levels and processes of change (individual, collective, institutional)—for instance, by elucidating the role that government authorities can have in facilitating *commoning* practices at the community level. Other strategies for degrowth discussed in the book include policy proposals such as a Green New Deal without growth, minimum and maximum income, universal basic services (e.g. health, education), the reduction of working hours, and the reform of public finance towards ecological sustainability and social equality.

In contrast to much of the transition scholarship, the authors are explicit about their awareness that they are writing from positions of privilege in Europe and North America. A deeper engagement with the anthropological roots of degrowth, such as anti-utilitarian and post-development thinking (D'Alisa et al., 2015), and a less confident dismissal of the tensions arising from these positions of privilege represented in the degrowth debate (p.49), could have nonetheless contributed to a more critical contextualization of the strategies for degrowth presented in this book.

As a compact book that deals with a complex subject, *The Case for Degrowth* leaves some questions unanswered; thereby—and perhaps unwittingly—offering room for fruitful collaboration between degrowth and sustainability transitions studies.

First, this book suggests that coevolution is the central theoretical pillar of strategies for a degrowth transition. The coevolution of 'conducive environments [...] among personal desires and habits, networks and changing institutions' (p. 52) is the central mechanism through which seemingly disparate individual, community and policy changes can organically come together to create the necessary synergies for transformative change beyond the limited space, time and scope of each single attempt to realize change towards

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degrowth. Readers familiar with ecological economics literature might suspect that the authors refer to earlier contributions to coevolutionary thinking within that discipline (Kallis, 2007). However, a sustainability transitions scholar might wonder how the concept of coevolution outlined in this book may relate, or indeed coincide, with evolutionary dynamics as they are explicated in transition theory (Safarzyńska et al., 2012). This is an underexplored research area where sustainability transition theories can offer analytical and theoretical foundations for the understanding of co-evolutionary dynamics that lead to the transformation of our societies in alignment with degrowth.

Second, the role of the private sector is weakly articulated both in this book and in the degrowth debate more generally. As noted by Cosme et al. (2017), degrowth theorists have tended to primarily emphasize the role of the state and consider grassroots or community initiatives as a secondary force. However, despite the centrality of the private sector and the market in its analysis of the costs of perpetual, compound growth, the book neglects to examine the place of the private sector in a degrowth transition: How could enterprises co-evolve with, possibly support, or resist the strategies outlined in this book? What forms of private economic enterprise are consistent with the types of socioeconomic systems that are envisioned in the degrowth scholarship? Such questions highlight another fruitful space for collaboration among degrowth and sustainability transition scholars working on social- and eco-entrepreneurship and sustainable business models, including those who, by being sufficiency- rather than efficiency-driven, seem to align with degrowth (e.g. Bocken and Short, 2016; Proka et al., 2018; Hofmann, 2019).

*The Case for Degrowth* particularly speaks to readers who are involved or interested in strategies for societal change towards sustainability; however, such readers will be presented with the current state of the degrowth debate concerning those issues rather than new lines of thought. Whereas readers who are already familiar with degrowth may skim through the first two diagnostic chapters and more deeply engage with later chapters that address strategies for degrowth, those who are less acquainted with this scholarship might wish to complement the book's first two chapters with other introductory readings (e.g. D'Alisa et al., 2015; Hickel, 2020).

In sum, *The Case for Degrowth* does what its title promises; it assertively advocates for a society and economy that aim at the wellbeing of all while also sustaining the natural basis of life, refuting the myth of green growth, and providing a clear compass to evaluate the directionality of sustainability transitions. This book also offers a refreshing perspective on processes of transition and the actors, strategies and policies involved therein, thereby countering certain intellectual automatisms in sustainability transition research, such as a disproportionate emphasis on market actors and mechanisms and taken-for-granted attempts of scaling upward or outward. Finally, this book challenges sustainability transition researchers to adopt a more reflexive stance on their positionality and their roles in the re-production of unsustainable socio-technical regimes. It prompts the reader to ask whether the social and economic models that are implied within established transition frameworks enable to transform, or merely help reproduce the growth-addictive tendencies at the roots of unsustainability and inequality.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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