Degrowth Journal Volume 3 (2025) 00452
http://doi.org/10.36399/Degrowth.003.01.09

degrowth
JOURNAL

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Degrowth and decolonisation in academia: Intersecting strategies towards transformation

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Information
Received 20 December 2024
Accepted 18 April 2025
Online 9 July 2025

Keywords
academia
strategy
transformation
university
decolonisation

Abstract
Like other societal institutions, academia today faces an existential crisis. Rising inequality and authoritarianism, coupled with climate breakdown and collapsing ecosystems, are threatening the conditions under which academic knowledge is produced and shared. At the same time, academics are coming to terms with their institutions' role in contributing to these processes, particularly in the Global North. Many are recognising the historical and present-day injustices underpinning the hegemony of Western universities, as well as the links between growth-oriented capitalist logics—reproduced, embodied and often sanctioned by academics—and the ongoing environmental crisis. How can academia transform into an institution that contributes to a just and sustainable future for all? In this study, we argue that transformations towards degrowth and decolonisation are already happening in many pockets within this institution, and describe the strategic logics behind them. Thinking with various degrowth scholars, we present our vision for an academic system characterised by radical abundance—meaning a reorganisation and reorientation of the social goods produced by universities through practices of public provisioning and communal sharing, rather than the currently dominant state of artificial scarcity. We then make use of the "strategic canvas for degrowth," developed by Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, as inspired by the work of Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright, to understand how power is today challenged within the university's walls, and how transformation towards radically abundant alternatives can be enacted. Using the case of a pro-Palestine student encampment at a Danish university—including how some academics engaged with this student-led initiative—we identify a shared thread across strategies towards degrowth and decolonisation: the critical contestation of what a "university" is, how it functions, and the purposes it is meant to serve.

Instead of linear, hierarchical, outcome-oriented strategies and strategic plans that can't adapt to changing conditions, we need ways of strategizing together based on understanding and respecting change. So far, the elements of emergent strategy are that it is intentional, interdependent and relational, adaptive, resilient because it is decentralized, fractal, uses transformative justice, and creates more possibilities.

– adrienne marie brown, Octavia's Brood (2015, pp. 280-281)

1. (Our) introduction: recognising academic positionalities

We sit in a tight circle on the little empty space in the midst of the encampment. The lawn is packed with tents. It is early morning, and the spring sun warms our faces. The students have just finished their communal breakfast and are eager to start the day. It is May 8th, 2024: Day 3 of the pro-Palestine student encampment at the University of Copenhagen. We are in "Rafah Garden" at the Faculty of Social Sciences: this courtyard has been renamed to remind people that Rafah—the southernmost tip of the Gaza strip—is currently under invasion by the Israeli occupation forces; an occupation that is financially and culturally supported by our university's managing board. About 40 students are now gathered, and so we begin the teach-in: a lecture on academic civil resistance, on past student uprisings against injustices, and on the historical ties between Western universities and colonial structures of power. After the lecture, we split into small groups to discuss how our academic spaces could be run differently, more democratically. What would it look like for our university to no longer be in service of capital accumulation, but in service of people and nature—here in Denmark, but also globally? How could we ensure that students and staff are involved in its governance? And how do we get there? How do we organise for change? My department's building towers above us, this site where I conduct research and hold lectures every day. Today though, my place is here, on the grass, where something new is being born. – F.R.

Academic papers rarely begin by describing their authors.[1] Biographies are typically reduced to one-line affiliations, as if our identities and research motivations were reducible to our places of work and our employment positions within those places. This invisibilisation of positionalities creates the illusion that knowledge is produced by "unmarked scholars" (Dennis, 2018), erasing the vulnerabilities, privileges, histories, and power structures in which academics are embedded (Haraway, 1988). In writing this study, we chose to reject the notion that we can be detached from place, time, and power. We believe that evincing our positionalities may also help make evident why we set out to write a piece about degrowth and decolonisation in academia in the first place.

All four of us work in universities and are enmeshed in hierarchies of power that come with differences in terms of varying privileges and insecurities. Fernando is a white male associate professor in evolutionary genetics and ecology, working at the University of Copenhagen, born in the settler colonial state of Argentina in what is originally Querandí land. Rebecca is a white female associate professor in political ecology at the same university, born in the settler colonial state now known as the USA and living in Denmark for over a decade. Ekaterina is a white female untenured degrowth scholar based at Lund University. All three are immigrant scholars. Mads is a white male postdoctoral researcher from Denmark working on climate politics, temporarily and precariously employed by the University of Copenhagen. These positionalities are important to acknowledge as we engage in critical analyses that may worsen existing job insecurities in a university system increasingly structured by labour precarity and hierarchical managerial power (Missé & Martel, 2024).

We are also united by a shared desire to help make our societies ecologically sustainable and socially just, and we view universities—and academia more broadly, as one site of this struggle. By academia we refer to the community of tertiary education and research that has become a hegemonic institution of knowledge production and dissemination, as conceived by and rooted in predominantly Western modes of thinking and acting (though now globally diffused). Academia is most commonly embodied in space by universities, scientific research

[1] Although important exceptions exist that inspire us, e.g. analyses by degrowth scholar activists Demmer & Hummel (2017).

centers, liberal arts schools, colleges, and other institutions of higher education.[2] At the same time, all four of us recognise that Western academia today—while not homogeneous—is in a deep existential crisis, as many actors who produce and reproduce it (including ourselves) are coming to terms with the many complicities and responsibilities this institution has had (and continues to have) in the crises we face societally—climate breakdown and collapsing ecosystems, rising inequalities and authoritarianism. Some have called these the "polycrisis" (Lawrence et al., 2024; Morin & Kern, 1999), which we understand as rooted in capitalism[3] and the contradictions between capital accumulation and social reproduction or continuity of life within it (Albert, 2025; Jayasuriya, 2023).

This article, conceived in late 2023, emerged from thinking about how to counter this predicament. We draw inspiration from degrowth[4] and decolonisation[5] perspectives to envision academia differently. This analysis stems from our embodied experiences of civil disobedience for climate justice, involvement in degrowth and decolonial movements, and efforts to 'normalise' degrowth and decolonial thinking in our universities. The article thus works within the methodological orientation of militant research, which aims to "contribute to processes of critical reflection and transformation of our movements" (Russell, 2015, p. 226). Within this orientation, "[p]roduction of knowledge is literally the production of tools that modify, enhance or create new ways of seeing and enable new ways of affecting the world" (Russell, 2015, p. 225), while "scientific knowledge is just one among many other forms of knowledge" (Demmer & Hummel, 2017, p. 612). Thinking about how the political milieus we are committed to—a key positionality in militant research—can transform our societies

[2] Throughout the text, we refer to both the broader term "academia," and the term "universities" as one spatial element of it, which is where we are physically located and where our experiences of academia largely come from.

[3] By capitalism, we mean a system wherein the means of production are privately owned by a class who runs them for a profit (Zimbalist, 1989).

[4] We understand degrowth as "a process of political and social transformation that reduces a society's throughput while improving the quality of life" (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 292) and "an alternative vision for societies, centred on life-making, ecological sustainability and social justice" (Schulken et al., 2022, p. 11). This transformation and vision "deepens democracy and guarantees a good life and social justice for all," and "does not depend on continuous expansion" (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 4).

[5] By colonialism, we mean the historical and ongoing subjugation and exploitation of lands and peoples, as practiced by the white European empires of the modern era, and by the State powers that emerged from them (e.g. the USA, Canada, Israel, Australia, and New Zealand). This can take many forms including slavery, exploitation, enforced trade, debt, settlement, and displacement. To us, decolonisation is the process of undoing the structures, logics, and ideologies that enable and promote colonialism.

led us to questions of strategy, which recent degrowth discussions help to reflect on. While collectively engaging with these themes analytically, all of us became embroiled in various ways in the global wave of actions, protests and marches in solidarity with Palestine that were launched after the invasion of Gaza since October 2023, including the student encampment at the University of Copenhagen, which became our case study by mid-2024. Ongoing analytical exchange amongst co-authors throughout 2024 led to the eventual article in late 2024.

Beginning in the US, and then spreading across the world, over 180 encampments (Students 4 Gaza, 2024) were organised by students in 2024, to demand their universities take action against Israel's genocide in Palestine. While the encampments were explicitly established in opposition to colonialist logics, to us they also embodied principles of anti-capitalism and degrowth. Like the student occupations of the civil rights movement era and street occupations by the Occupy movement in the early 2010s, these occupations were decentralised and horizontally-run. They were based on principles of sufficiency, conviviality, and mutual aid, actively mitigated against capital intrusion and power hierarchies, and welcomed intersectionality. The experience of the encampment at the University of Copenhagen prompted us to think deeply about strategy for transformation[6] towards degrowth and decolonisation in academia, about the different modes of transformation that can be enacted on a campus lawn, and on how these can intersect and reinforce each other. Some authors' direct engagement in the encampment involved co-occupation, provision of food, teach-ins, and co-development of media content throughout its month-long presence on campus. These provided numerous opportunities for observations while actively participating in the process, which was documented and then analysed through the conceptual lens of the strategic canvas for degrowth (Chertkovskaya, 2022).

This article aims to map out strategies for degrowth and decolonisation in academia, and to capture the dynamic intersections between them through analysis of the encampment at the

[6] By transformation, we mean "a process of altering the fundamental attributes of a system, including in this case structures and institutions, infrastructures, regulatory systems, financial regimes, as well as attitudes and practices, lifestyles, policies and power relations" (Hackman & St Clair, 2012, p. 16), which is necessarily socio-ecological.

University of Copenhagen. The structure of the article is as follows. First, we bring together critical studies of Western academia and reflect on the current state of this institution. We then present our positive vision for what it could look like in the future. We continue by outlining different modes of transformation that we theorise could get us "there" and that we observe are already being enacted, as well as the strategic logics behind them. We then turn to the specific pro-Palestine student encampment at the University of Copenhagen: its origins, its strategic logics, the intersections among them, and their effects on both the university and broader society. Finally, we synthesise our insights around the concept of contestation, namely the contestation of what a university is or is supposed to be.

2. Academia and its complicities

Popular discourses about our societies' capacity—or lack thereof—to confront the polycrisis often point to academia as a key institution for spurring change. Academia is where large amounts of scientific knowledge about climate, ecological, and societal breakdown—and the purported "solutions" for tackling these so-called "challenges"—are supposed to be generated.[7] Yet, it has increasingly been recognised that academic institutions are intimately tied to the causes of these processes (Bhambra et al., 2018; Hiltner et al., 2024; Lachapelle et al., 2024). As anarchist theorist and activist Peter Gelderloos (2022) put it:

> *Ecocide is a highly technical process. Not a single one of the industries responsible for destroying our home has developed without the integral participation of academically trained experts. Not a single oil well, not a single gold mine, not a single fracking site. (p. 62)*

Similarly, McGeown and Barry (2023) argue that universities are effectively acting as "agents of unsustainability" by reproducing and proliferating environmentally damaging capitalist logics, across their various operating spheres—research, education, and outreach. This is done, for example, by fostering research partnerships with polluting industries through discourses of "innovation" and "competitivity", by encouraging hypermobility and air travel,

[7] We refer the reader to the strategy documents of our own universities, as just two of many examples of these claims (Lund University, 2023; University of Copenhagen, 2023).

by the increasing financialisation of university funds in global capitalist markets, or through the consumption of ever larger amounts of resources—largely sourced from the Global South—for the construction of new campus buildings, new laboratories, and ever more resource-intensive research instruments and computational data centers. Thus, universities perpetuate an imperial mode of academic work that relies on and normalises the exploitation and subjugation of human and more-than-human beings in historically oppressed regions of the world, predominantly in the Global South (Bhambra et al., 2018), while hoarding resources and exacerbating inequalities in their local neighbourhoods (Baldwin, 2021).

Universities today are also evaluated according to capitalist growth-oriented logics: they are ranked by the amount of student fees they collect, the number of scientific papers they produce, and the number of patents or corporate partnerships they secure, all of which are expected to continually increase (Collini, 2012; Slaughter & Leslie, 1999; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Additionally, as public support has decreased over the past five decades, universities rely on funding from profit-seeking agents, including large corporations and wealthy donors, while catering to their interests and developing ever closer partnerships with them (la paperson, 2017; Stephens, 2024). Even non-profit universities have become enmeshed in various profit circuits despite their official non-profit status, effectively treating students as consumers and academics as service providers (Collini, 2012; McGeown & Barry, 2023).

This imperial capitalist paradigm is not merely imposed on the university from the outside; it is also fostered from within. Universities often act as shareholders in many corporations whose business rely on extractivism and ecological devastation, and that are causing climate breakdown, like fossil fuel companies (Barron et al., 2023). At the same time, these corporations drive large amounts of money into the university system, rendering academic departments subservient to their needs (Data for Progress, 2023; Investigate Europe, 2023; Westervelt, 2023). Universities also buttress the military-industrial complex, either directly investing in capitalist enterprises that depend on the perpetuation of imperial wars and genocide, or providing material and intellectual support to them (Ajonye, 2024; Giroux, 2007). For example, in the context of the occupation of Palestine, many Western universities engage in “[p]artnerships with defence contractors, joint research projects with Israeli institutions

directly implicated in the occupation, and investments in corporations that manufacture weapons used in Gaza" (Ziadah, 2025, p. 244; see also Palestine Solidarity Campaign, 2025).

The involvement of academics in these activities influences which ideas are promoted and allowed to spread inside the university's walls—and which are not. Service to society is predominantly equated with service to capital in the global power cores, while technocratic solutionism and neoclassical economics are positioned as the primary responses to global socio-ecological challenges (Stephens, 2024). These challenges are themselves framed in anthropocentric and dualistic ways, which elevate the "natural" and "technical" sciences over the humanities, the social sciences and non-Western ways of knowing, and that largely deprioritise or invisibilise theories and practices conducive to collective action, decolonisation and radical socio-ecological transformation (Dupont et al., 2024; Gardner et al., 2021; Muradian & Gómez-Baggethun, 2021; Shahjahan et al., 2022; Thierry et al., 2023).

Against artificial scarcity

While capitalist logics have come to play a dominant role in academic work in recent decades, the university system has for centuries been structured to serve the interests of the few, at the expense of the many. Throughout its history, Western academia has been characterised by the enclosure of knowledge—often extracted from Indigenous and local contexts and made available only to those who can afford it, to (re)produce privilege. Many of today's "elite" Western universities were originally established through violent land grabs and racialised exploitation, while access to them has since been restricted on the basis of class, gender, race, or ethnicity, enabling certain segments of the population to attain economic security as others languished in poverty (Grosfoguel, 2013; Macleod, 1993; Stein, 2022).

Today, the logics of profit-making and infinite growth have created extreme privilege differentials within the university's walls as well. Most staff are placed in increasingly precarious employment arrangements and encouraged to be competitive, entrepreneurial, and hyper-productive, at the expense of their wellbeing, health, and capacity to engage with society (Laketa & Côte, 2023). As a consequence, research funding and other resources are more and more concentrated into the (predominantly white male) hands of so-called "scientific elites" (Andersen & Nielsen, 2024), whose careers are built on the backs of the

many who labour in precarious conditions, and to the neglect of the social reproductive work of the university social context that too often falls to females and women (Mohr et al., 2019). This is contributing to a crisis of stress and burnout amongst university employees and students alike (Fernández-Suárez et al., 2021; Watts & Robertson, 2011). Tensions are further heightened by cutbacks in public funding to higher education (Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021; Nixon, 2017) inducing a hyper-competitive state as access to and control over dwindling remaining resources are struggled over. In Western academia, everything that can be is made scarce.

Scarcity is the general context of insufficiency—whether in relation to good food and water, clean air, secure and meaningful livelihoods—and many more material and psychological aspects of a decent life within specific socio-cultural contexts (Kallis, 2019). All of the above exist in abundance; it is access to them that is, and has long been, constrained. Capitalism, according to economic anthropologist and degrowth scholar Jason Hickel (2019, p. 58) is a "scarcity machine"—it feeds, and feeds off, the imperative of competitive productivity that drives growth and undermines social and ecological wellbeing. He describes how the force of scarcity is felt in the constant threat of unemployment, and the compulsion for workers to be ever-more productive at work, "or else lose their jobs to someone who will be more productive still – usually someone poorer and more desperate" (Hickel, 2019, p. 61). Academia is not untouched by the scarcity machine: the imperatives to keep producing ever more papers, to teach ever more courses, to acquire ever larger amounts of external funding—under ever more uncertain working conditions—are all part and parcel of academic life.

3. Academia as a site of transformation

Despite their enmeshing in systems that generate oppression and scarcity, academic institutions have also been—and in some cases still are—critical sites of transformation. They are environments that can nourish counter-hegemonic ways of thinking and acting, which challenge the status quo. Therefore, universities can also play pivotal roles in the construction of ecologically sustainable, socially just, and decolonial worlds (Bhambra et al., 2018; Stephens, 2024).

Historically, universities have been sites of social mobilisation, with student movements playing important roles in larger societal transformations. In the United States, for example, university protests played a key part in protests against the Vietnam war and for the civil rights movements during the 1960s (Morgan & Davies, 2012). In France, student revolts culminated in 1968 with a national strike that almost toppled the French government (Mercer, 2020). In South Africa, student movements such as the Soweto uprisings mounted resistance against the discriminatory policies of the apartheid regime (Hirston, 1979). In China, students at Tiananmen Square in 1989 protested for political rights and were met with military repression (Lim, 2014). More recently, challenges to both the capitalist growth paradigm and colonial forms of domination have taken hold of many campuses, also in Europe and North America—the historical centres of Western empires. Emerging acts of academic resistance have included university occupations, walkouts, interruptions of speeches, and other acts of civil disobedience and direct action by students, scholars, and other staff members. At the same time, alternatives to the Western university as the dominant source of knowledge are proliferating, such as self-organised educational groups, "free universities," "ecoversities," and "pluriversities" (see e.g. GTA, 2020; Movement for a Free Academia, 2024; The Ecoversities Alliance, n.d.).

Calls for transforming academia have multiplied over the past decade. These include demands for a change in how the university responds to the climate crisis (McGeown & Barry, 2023; Thierry et al., 2023; Urai & Kelly, 2023), how it engages with its colonial past and present (Bhambra et al., 2018), and how it is governed—particularly calls for truly democratic governance (Missé & Martel, 2024). Within the degrowth literature specifically, Buch-Hansen et al. (2025, p. 1) envision "an academia for degrowth transformations that is less mobile, hierarchical, competitive and narcissistic and more stationary, democratic, and oriented towards inner growth." There have also been calls for more active engagement of academics through their teaching, research, and especially outreach—including critical-emancipatory pedagogies aligned with degrowth values (Jones, 2021; Kaufmann et al., 2019; Prádanos, 2015; Tannock, 2025), involvement in activist research (Demmer & Hummel, 2017), and going beyond conventional forms of academic behaviour and toward thoughtful acts of civil disobedience such as blockades and occupations (Gardner & Wordley, 2019; Racimo, Valentini, et al., 2022). Ideally, such practices would be supported by environments where

advocacy and activism are incentivised, not sanctioned (Gardner et al., 2021). These calls are not merely instantiated in academic papers. They are one of the many results of living, breathing movements that have emerged within academia itself (Bhambra et al., 2018; McGeown & Barry, 2023). These include (among others) movements like Rhodes Must Fall, the Palestine student encampments, Scientist Rebellion, Scientists for XR, Fossil Free Academia, and End Fossil Occupy. But what would academic systems that embody degrowth and decolonisation look like?

Towards radical abundance

Inspired by the notion of radical abundance (Hickel, 2019; also see Latouche, 2014), universities could constitute places of intellectual and social flourishing through secure livelihoods and fundamentally different ways of obtaining and making use of institutional resources. Radical abundance entails rich and widely accessible social goods organised through diverse modes of communal sharing and public provisioning. As such, it represents both the antipode and the antidote to the artificial scarcity generated by capitalism.

Embracing radical abundance in universities would be transformative. Concretely, we could expect more horizontal governance arrangements for more vibrant university democracies. Current hierarchical managerial structures tend to place professional (and often unelected) managers in control of key financial decisions, such as the crafting of university budgets. These managers can be out of touch with the needs and desires of the staff and students of the university, who are most impacted by the decisions they make. Worse, managerial structures tend to reproduce themselves, through the dissemination of so-called “new public management” practices which frame universities as profit-seeking corporations, undermining academic freedom and critical inquiry (Brown, 2015; Morley, 2024).

Bringing more financial decisions into the hands of staff and students organised in various types of deliberative fora (Missé & Martel, 2024) would advance a more abundant university, insomuch as available resources are better understood (i.e. rendered visible) and distributed in more transparent ways that support equity amongst staff, various departments, and students (in the form of e.g. student support and services) over the long term. Mechanisms to address substantial power differences amongst types of staff as well as between staff and

students would be essential, even as such power dynamics would be diminished over time. Ideally, such shifts would be accompanied by a broader economic restructuring that financially empowers public knowledge-producing institutions while diminishing private influence over research agendas—also liberating academics' time and energy for more critical inquiry and societal engagement (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Stengers, 2018).

Radical abundance—through economic and broader democratic governance—would also put a halt to the concentration of power and funding in the hands of a few. Universities would recognise in all senses the value of care and wellbeing, they would not rely on vast amounts of precarious labour, and they would center the social reproductive work done mostly by women (both within and outside the university) which makes it possible for knowledge to be created and disseminated in the first place.

A radically abundant university could embrace work-sharing arrangements. Such arrangements have long featured in broader degrowth policy proposals to rethink the nature of employment and work culture, and reorganise the distribution of necessary and valuable work amongst social groups (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Kallis, 2015). Specifically, work-sharing equips several people to fulfill specific tasks associated with what could also be a singular full-time employment position. This enables those who desire more leisure or personal time to go down in work hours without putting their economic security at risk, while increasing employment opportunities in general. Work-sharing can make a significant contribution to overall mental wellbeing, not to mention also enabling a more equitable distribution of traditionally gendered care work at home (Kamerāde et al., 2020).

Thinking with decolonial scholars, radical abundance in knowledge creation and sharing would also involve bringing down artificial barriers created between Western and non-Western modes of knowing and thinking (Bhambra et al., 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2018; Grosfoguel, 2013). It would mean a more equitable distribution of academic power across the Global North–Global South divide, in such a way that knowledge creators and sharers in non-Western institutions and in other non-academic communities of learning no longer feel silenced, diminished, or invisibilised by the (often violently) imposed standards and hierarchies of power of Western academia (Ghosh, 2021; Stein et al., 2021). Concretely, it

would mean Global North "elite" institutions would no longer have an effective monopoly over the instruments (journals, publishing houses, societies, grant agencies) that today determine what scholarship is "valid," "impactful," and "prestigious," and what is not.

Finally, radical abundance in academia would leave more time for students, researchers and academics to engage in the political life of their local communities. This could occur through the freed-up time stemming from the aforementioned work-sharing arrangements, but it could also become part of the explicit work mandate of academics themselves (Gardner et al., 2021). Recognising societal engagement through advocacy, activism and other forms of democratic participation would serve to dispel the myth of the "neutral," apolitical scientist, which essentially boils down to an imperative to acquiesce to the current political status quo, and to neglect one's responsibilities towards one's fellow humans and the more than human world (van Eck et al., 2024). Devoting more time and energy to the active engagement of academia in society could further accelerate the process of socio-ecological transformation, not just by activating scientists as participants in such a transformation, but by having them learn from the needs, knowledge, and aspirations of the local resident communities in which they are embedded (Koch, 2022), to better contribute to them in a way that is just, informed, and respectful.

4. Modes of transformation and strategic logics

So how do we get there? To examine strategies for transforming academia, we draw on the "strategic canvas," developed by one of us (Chertkovskaya, 2022)—a framework designed to foster analytical thinking about strategies. This framework is helpful for thinking more systematically about the different ways we can work collectively towards a transformation of academia. The canvas maps out three modes of transformation—*interstitial*, *symbiotic,* and *ruptural*—and the strategic logics corresponding to each of them. The analytical categories stem from the earlier work of Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright (2010, 2019), but have been reinterpreted and further elaborated by Ekaterina Chertkovskaya in the book *Degrowth & Strategy* (Barlow et al., 2022).

Figure 1. Metaphorical illustration of the three modes of transformation discussed in the text.
Left photo credit: Fernando Racimo (CC-BY-NC); middle photo credit: Amaya Navarro (CC-BY-NC); right photo credit: Arseny Khakhalin (CC-BY).

Interstitial transformations are aimed at building alternatives on the margins of the capitalist system, outside the spaces dominated by those in power. They can play a role in reducing capitalism's dominance and in pointing out trajectories beyond this system (Wright, 2010, 2019). In the context of Western universities subjected to capitalist logics, a student group fostering learning about degrowth outside of the formal classroom can be seen as working within this mode of transformation. Other examples include independent, not-for-profit collective publishing initiatives that do not extract fees from either readers or authors (ephemera et al., 2021; Guillemaud et al., 2019; Racimo, Galtier, et al., 2022). Interstitial transformations of academia (often occurring outside or without recognition of universities) create spaces for alternative education, publishing, and alliance-building, and may involve university students and staff as well as social movements and civil society. Such initiatives are relatively easy to start since the main requirement is a collective of like-minded people, but they risk remaining on the margins, mostly due to being based on voluntary labour and limited material resources.

The strategic logics of interstitial transformations are *resisting*, *escaping* (Wright, 2019), and *building alternatives* (Chertkovskaya, 2022). Resisting aims to reduce harms by highlighting a

particular problem and demonstrating discontent with how it is addressed by the status quo. A protest on campus against the fossil or military industries' presence at a careers fair is one example. Resisting does not attempt to take over power, but to make elites' problematic actions more costly for them, eventually influencing or putting a stop to certain policies and practices. Escaping explicitly aims at transcending structures for more egalitarian forms of living and organising through collective escape from capitalism. According to Wright (2019), these activities typically avoid broader political engagement. However, by offering concrete alternatives, they can also serve as prefigurative building blocks. The strategic logic of building alternatives involves building power outside the capitalist system, through networks of mutual aid and solidarity (Chertkovskaya, 2022). For example, alternative educational initiatives run on principles of radical pedagogy, unlearning, and horizontal community-building (GTA, 2020; PRALER, 2024; The Ecoversities Alliance, n.d.). When they are mainly focused on the activities of the group—a challenging task in itself—they operate from the strategic logic of escaping. When they are actively building networks, connections, and solidarities with other actors, or working on amplifying the efforts of allied initiatives, they are mobilising the strategic logic of building alternatives.

In contrast, *symbiotic* transformations are aimed at transforming existing institutions from within (Wright, 2010, 2019). University staff and students pushing for university courses and programmes devoted to degrowth, decolonisation, feminist thinking, queer theory, and other critical perspectives can be seen as employing this mode of transformation.[8] Efforts towards symbiotic transformations within academia are usually directed to different levels of university governance (from university departments to the university as a whole), particular university bodies (e.g. libraries), or other bodies relevant to the university (e.g. publishers and unions). Fostering symbiotic transformations is a slow process that requires navigating bureaucracies and power relations within the university, with many difficulties along the way. These include gaining a deep understanding of how a particular institution (e.g. a university)

[8] Examples include two degrowth-oriented Master's programmes at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Degrowth PhD courses at the University of Copenhagen and Lund University, and the multiple universities across Europe teaching ecological economics. A comprehensive overview of such type of initiatives is challenging (see for example The Degrowth Database for an initiative to collate degrowth-related education programs), and we are aware that some of our colleagues, and many university faculty we do not know, are struggling to include systems-critical content into their courses. However, these efforts remain marginal in academia today.

works, as well as developing effective ways to counteract tactics that those in power might deploy against transformation, such as shifting responsibility to others, ignoring demands for alternatives, or even repressing dissenting voices.

Symbiotic transformations entail the strategic logics of *taming* and *dismantling* (Wright, 2019). Taming refers to institutional changes that reduce the harms of the capitalist system while dismantling refers to institutional changes that lead to transcending existing structures. For example, integrating critical perspectives into existing course content may help tame capitalist logics within academia. Such efforts may inform and inspire students to eventually demand full courses and even programmes, but there is also a risk that *taming* is what these efforts lead to, for example, with university authorities slowing down or abandoning the process of implementing change, once popular pressure has loosened. A deeper democratic reform with substantial curriculum change, however, would operate within the strategic logic of dismantling. Introducing a university-wide course on the ecosocial crisis could be one example. It is expected to occur at the University of Barcelona, where the students should nominate up to 60% of the academics and experts to devise the course (Burgen, 2022; Universitat de Barcelona, 2024). This could flag deep democratic change in course design, though it is yet to be seen how close the final outcome is in relation to student demands. Importantly, dismantling is unlikely to be spearheaded by those with decision-making power. In the Barcelona example, such structural curriculum change would not have been possible without a seven-day sit-in occupation by students from the End Fossil group.

This brings us to the strategic logics of *ruptural* transformations. Wright (2019) viewed a combination of interstitial and symbiotic modes of transformation as key to eroding capitalism in the 21st century. He was, however, sceptical of ruptural transformations, which he associated with a sharp break from existing institutions through a direct attack on the state, since—to him—these have not resulted in truly emancipatory alternatives in the past (see also Wright, 2010). In turn, Chertkovskaya (2022) reclaims the notion of ruptural transformations, reinterpreting it not as seizures of state power, but as more situated captures of space or power from dominant groups or institutions (e.g. employers, corporations, public authorities). These take place in smaller-scale geographic contexts or over limited periods of time. They are important since they can break the rhythms of

capitalism (and capitalist academia), even if temporarily. Ruptural transformations can entail taking hold of land, space, and infrastructure, thus changing power and economic relations in those spaces, which would not be possible through interstitial transformations (e.g. due to it being inaccessible or unaffordable), and too slow through symbiotic transformations.

For example, student occupations of university spaces, as part of decolonial and/or climate justice struggles, can be understood as engaging in the ruptural mode of transformation. In recent years, these types of actions have served to call out universities as structurally complicit in the genocide against the Palestinian people through collaboration with Israeli institutions, or in the climate crisis through their ties with the fossil fuel industry. Like interstitial transformations, they can be directed at fellow students, staff, and the broader public, aiming to bring attention to and spread awareness within the university and beyond about existing injustices. Like *symbiotic* transformations, they may also be directed at different institutions (and their representatives) relevant to the university or present on its premises (e.g. university administration, representatives of the state), confronting them with specific demands. Initiatives that engage with the ruptural mode of transformation, however, are directly confrontational and more daring in their actions. In doing this, they can accelerate processes of change, through taking power, quickly mobilising solidarity, and/or pushing authorities to react. At the same time, they can come with a risk of repression, public disapproval, or being short-lived.

The strategic logics of ruptural transformations are *halting*—which reduces harms through temporarily disrupting the rhythms of capitalism or daily life as usual (Chertkovskaya, 2022)—and *smashing* (Wright, 2019), which transcends structures through capturing power in a specific space. An interruption of an event associated with the status quo, such as the university's leadership meeting or an event with a high-level representative of the state, are associated with the strategic logic of halting. For instance, in April 2024, when the Swedish Prime Minister spoke at Lund University, students not only held protests outside the lecture hall, but also continuously interrupted his speech, to highlight the government's complicity in the genocide in Palestine (Eleonorasdotter et al., 2024; Viberg, 2024). An occupation of a university space—in the form of encampments or sit-ins—exemplifies the strategic logic of smashing. Even if temporary, lasting some days or weeks, occupations reclaim space for

horizontal politics and collective decision-making, challenge the acceptance and silencing of systemic injustices within universities, and might help amplify the voices of protesters.

Table 1. Examples of initiatives within the academic arena operating across different strategic logic within the three modes of transformation. Credit: authors.

	Reducing harms	**Transcending structures**
Interstitial **transformations**	*Resisting* A protest on campus (e.g. against fossil or military industries' presence at a careers fair)	*Escaping / building alternatives* Alternative educational initiatives ("ecoversities," "free universities," "pluriversities," alternative teaching modes etc.) or research and dissemination initiatives (diamond open access, self-organised publications, alternative outreach etc.)
Symbiotic **transformations**	*Taming* Integrating degrowth and decolonial perspectives into existing course content	*Dismantling* Substantial curriculum change centered on environmental and social justice, a deep democratic reform across a university's governance structures, institutional divestment from extractivist corporations
Ruptural **transformations**	*Halting* An interruption of or walk-out from an academic event associated with the status quo (e.g. university talk by a fossil fuel CEO)	*Smashing* A university occupation (e.g. encampment or sit-in) by students and/or staff with the goal to divest from harmful industries or change governance structures

Importantly, the three modes of transformation are not mutually exclusive and can become powerful when deployed in coordination (Chertkovskaya, 2022; Wright, 2019). Overall, it has been argued that strategic pluralism is essential for degrowth, with tools such as the strategic canvas helping to foster strategic thinking (Schulken et al., 2022). This also holds for efforts towards transformation of academia. For example, self-organising alternative education does not preclude a group from pushing for inclusion of this education into the formal university programme. An occupation of a university space—while aligned with the ruptural mode of transformation—can be organised along the principles that prefigure a more horizontal and direct democratic involvement, in line with interstitial transformation (Aitchison, 2011). At the same time, occupations with concrete demands directed at university leadership show how ruptures can ultimately serve to accelerate symbiotic transformation. In view of this, the strategic canvas is not only a tool for analytically locating initiatives within the various modes of transformation, but also for examining the dynamics between them—paying attention to tensions and synergies.

5. Intersecting strategies: the Rafah Garden encampment

Here, we use the case study of a specific pro-Palestine encampment established at the University of Copenhagen (KU, where three of us are employed) to illustrate how the logics of a managerial, capitalist university can be challenged from below through a combination of ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic strategies—working together in distinct yet intersecting spheres of action. This encampment was successful in getting the university's management to divest from corporations supporting Israel's occupation of Palestine. Importantly, it also demonstrated how the strategic logics described above can be mutually reinforcing.

Beginning in September 2021, after being informed by journalists that the university's management had invested millions of Danish kroner in UN-blacklisted corporations involved in the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, the student group *Studerende Mod Besaettelsen* (SMB, Students Against the Occupation) ran a divestment campaign (Arbejderen, 2021; Yasar, 2023). The campaign included repeated meetings with the rector, flyering, legal demonstrations across all KU campuses, and the publishing of a report on research into the university's financial investments, which at the time were not publicly

available. By October 2023, the group had collected 2,092 signatures from students, faculty, and staff in support of divestment. These were presented to the rector and the university board—but ultimately ignored (Yasar, 2024). After the onset of the full-scale invasion of Gaza, the group started carrying out peaceful protests outside the board's meetings. Then, on May 6th, 2024, SMB established the Gaza solidarity encampment in a campus esplanade of the university's central city campus—rebaptised "Rafah Garden"—with the support of several staff, student and civil society groups (Esbjørnsen, 2024). SMB demanded that the university's management condemn the ongoing genocide, divest, and end agreements with companies that are complicit in the occupation of Palestine, provide financial transparency regarding investments, commit to an academic boycott, and recognise the plight of its Palestinian students (Thomsen, 2024a).

The Rafah Garden encampment was—in its original conception—working with the ruptural strategic logic of smashing. After years of being ignored through symbiotic and interstitial strategies purely oriented at reducing harms, SMB—alongside many other university-based groups around the world—switched gears and captured power in a specific location: a lawn surrounded by campus buildings, which was otherwise unused. In doing so, they transcended structures and challenged how they were meant to interact with university spaces. Yet, the very act of building the camp created room for further interstitial transformations. With access to their own space, they could self-organise to host teach-ins, seminars, documentary viewings, and training sessions on direct action, all occurring (literally) at the interstices of the academy. Decisions about camp activities, protests, and mobilisation drives were taken through consensus-based horizontal organising, via interconnected working groups. In the camp, care took center stage: hundreds of people donated food to the camp's communal kitchen, and the campers hosted vegetarian cooking and crafting workshops, while rotating cleaning and logistical tasks. The camp also hosted and maintained its own library—full of books about civil resistance and direct action (Racimo et al., 2024). In all these ways, Rafah Garden epitomised a vision of a radically abundant educational environment, breaking down the walls of artificially scarce knowledge-sharing and other resources—from food to time to participation in discussion—that enable social flourishing.

The camp was also a strategic location for organising and mobilising for protests on other parts of campus. From their newly occupied space, the students could easily launch marches and protests in support of their campaign, as well as interrupt key events to advance their demands. One of these—a seminar by the pro-rector of education Kristian Lauta together with the Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen—was attended almost entirely by student protestors, who flooded the event with critical questions to the minister about their role in the transfer of Danish military equipment to Israel (Thomsen, 2024b). Thus, the camp opened up opportunities to strengthen broader struggles on issues that had, until then, remained unaddressed within academic structures.

The encampment was buttressed by symbiotic strategic logics. Students engaged with university management and the wider campus community through established channels. This included the writing of op-eds in academic and national media and collecting signatures for petitions supporting the students' demands. It also included sending a delegation of SMB representatives tasked with dialogue with management. Through the encampment, these actions were now powerfully reinforced by the simultaneous ruptural strategy. Management began paying attention to the movement only once it disrupted normalised modes of academic life—they could no longer be ignored. The encampment also opened up new conversations on campus about broader issues that transcended the local site of resistance at Rafah Garden. These included broader discussion about the ethical implications of university investments in private corporations, and on the extent to which a university can dictate its own financial policy, as opposed to delegating it to third-party financial managers (Juhl, 2024a).

In line with the interstitial strategic logics of building alternatives, the camp also became a site for collaboration and alliance-building across movements. As in other camps around the world, climate activists came in solidarity. Extinction Rebellion provided tents and other camping materials, while a legal support organisation called Ulydig Retshjælp (Disobedient Legal Aid)—established years earlier to assist activists facing legal repression from participating in climate civil disobedience—provided advice and training to student campers, educating them about their rights and possible legal consequences of their actions. Meanwhile, the climate collective Scientist Rebellion (of which one author of this piece, F.R.,

is a member) was invited to give a teach-in inside the camp on the connections between colonialism and climate breakdown. For example, it addressed how countries in the Global South and racialised communities in the Global North are disproportionately affected by climate disasters, and how purported techno-managerial "solutions" to climate change end up extending colonial structures of power and domination (Sultana, 2023; Whyte, 2017, 2018). These and other academic events provided a platform for discussing and exchanging ideas for how the university could be run differently—how the radical abundance that was being prefigured in the camp could be expanded beyond the site of the camp itself. The camp also allowed for the burgeoning of new collectives. These included the network We Are KU which is now working towards deep democratic reform of the University of Copenhagen's governance structures (We are KU, 2025), as well as the collective Academics for Palestine which has successfully mobilised academics country-wide, in joint struggle with the students from SMB, to push for both divestment and an academic boycott of Israeli universities (Academics for Palestine, 2024).

The students and academics participating in the camp were undergoing a process of Freirean "conscientisation" (Freire, 1974, 1992), in other words a development of their critical understanding of their political environment, and of the power they can collectively wield for transformation. Through teach-ins and training sessions inside Rafah Garden, participants learned from members of other direct-action groups about how to organise for change and deploy tactics they had not tried before. They were thus creating alternative spaces for the co-creation of what Cox (2015) calls "movement-based forms of knowledge," which contrast with the academically-derived knowledge of traditional scholarship. This was an interstitial process—but it has since inspired wider discussions among both students and staff about the lack of decolonial scholarship in its formal educational programs, many of which are being rethought in light of these events. Thus, engagement with interstitial strategy served to advance a push for symbiotic transformation of the academic curriculum.

One month after the encampment was established, the university's management partially conceded to the student demands, divesting from their current holdings in the complicit corporations and committing to financial transparency (Juhl, 2024b). In response, as a sign of goodwill, the students chose to lift the encampment with a closing ceremony in which they

planted an olive tree in the middle of the garden—again challenging notions about who is allowed to do what within the university's walls. But this was not the end of the campaign. By the autumn of 2024, SMB had consolidated and expanded, mounting a country-wide effort to get all Danish universities to enact a boycott on academic partnerships with Israeli universities. At least three other encampments sprung from the trainings and discussions at Rafah Garden: two in the southern campus of the University of Copenhagen and another at the doorstep of the Copenhagen city legislature. The latter led the city's mayor to also divest from UN-blacklisted corporations involved in the occupation of Palestine—once more demonstrating the extramural implications of university-based movements (Ebad, 2024).

Figure 2. The planting of the Rafah Garden olive tree, during the closing ceremony of the student encampment at the University of Copenhagen. June 3rd, 2024. Credit: anonymous / Studerende Mod Besættelsen.

6. Contesting what universities are

Through a combination of strategic logics within different modes of transformation, the occupying students were contesting implicit norms about what a university lawn could be used for, who could occupy such a lawn, and for what purposes. They were also contesting the image of students as passive receivers of knowledge—taking the reins of their own education, and teaching both faculty and managers about the history of settler colonialism, and about the ethical implications of genocide and scholasticide. Finally, they contested how a university space could be run—through horizontal organising, care, and mutual aid. Rafah Garden thus became a site where multiple contestations intersected. More broadly, the international Palestine student encampment movement—as well as earlier campus occupations in protest of fossil partnerships—were also sites of contestation. They were usually centered on particular spaces—central campus buildings that were highly visible, and often disruptive to the normal rhythms of campus life. They symbolised the urge to challenge the status quo; and to move away from such an apparent state of normalcy.

But these contestations extended beyond the individual sites that were occupied. They also challenged the broader role universities can have with respect to society: as either protectors or challengers of ongoing injustices. Ultimately, all of these also contested the very ideal of what a university can—or should—be (Collini, 2012; Stephens, 2024). They revealed how universities as they exist today are not fulfilling their obligation to serve society, but rather perpetuate uneven relations of power in the service of a wealthy few, largely located in the imperial metropoles of Europe and North America. In this sense, they echoed earlier student and academic uprisings, including the pacifist and anti-authoritarian protests of the 1960s (Mercer, 2020; Morgan & Davies, 2012), the uprisings in apartheid South Africa (Hirson, 1979), and—perhaps most consonant with them—the protests in solidarity with Palestine by students on Israeli university campuses, which have been routinely suppressed through intimidation and violence for decades (Wind, 2024). Like these and many others before them, the 2024 pro-Palestine encampments served to lay bare the notion that academic institutions often enable injustices in the societies they are embedded in.

The encampment contestations were also prefigurative propositions: *Universities can be something else. Look, this is one way that we could run them.* They invited reflection about what could be: what could be taught and who could do the teaching, as well as what could be achieved through collective organising. They prompted critical questioning of the lack of democratic decision-making and of existing power relations within the university. In the words of Lucas Rigillo, one of the campers: "When the students start organising and working together, the powerful people get scared" (van der Velde, 2024). Finally, these contestations served as points of connection, of community, while also pointing at the weaknesses in the institutional machinery. *For a few weeks, our university was something else, something better. Why stop there?* In this way too, there were echoes of the past: *L'imagination au pouvoir*, now perhaps more urgent than ever before.

7. Conclusion

While academia is complicit in today's polycrisis, it is also a space for fostering socio-ecological transformation, with many initiatives already involved in this process. Instead of artificial scarcity, we have argued that universities can be reshaped around the principle of radical abundance—promoting genuine openness and critical thinking, while contributing to socio-ecological justice and ultimately to futures built on degrowth and decolonisation. In other words, universities can become institutions that challenge—rather than reproduce—structures of power.

In this article, we have not only shown that there are already changes taking place within universities, contesting what they are supposed to be, but also exemplified the modes of transformation and strategic logics that underpin them. The strategic canvas stimulates analytical thinking about the different pathways through which transformation toward radical abundance can be pursued both within academia and beyond. Through the case of Rafah Garden at the University of Copenhagen, we have shown the interplay of different transformational strategies in practice.

Notably, engagement with ruptural strategies—which have received less attention in degrowth discussions (Chertkovskaya, 2022)—was pivotal for the Rafah Garden at the

University of Copenhagen, creating urgency and a momentum where the university had to respond. At the same time, these were pursued in combination with other strategies, which were crucial for maintaining the movement's efforts and amplifying them after the encampment, ultimately pushing for change on a national scale. This strategic pluralism—which has been highlighted as essential for degrowth (Schulken et al., 2022, p. 24)—points to a broader insight that is relevant to other transformative struggles beyond academia. In the context of climate justice, for example, actors are often discussing what the right course of strategic action is: should activists prioritise ruptural strategies through engagement with civil disobedience and direct action, should they build new and prefigurative interstitial spaces outside existing institutions, or should they engage in the slow and symbiotic work of changing institutions from within? Rather than debating over what is the single best strategy to bring about transformation, the strategic canvas presented here can help us think more systematically—and systemically—about the different modes of transformation and how they can reinforce rather than work against each other. In other words, the case of Rafah Garden, explored through the strategic canvas, shows how strategic pluralism can be powerful, and can be worth adopting as a conscious strategy for degrowth and decolonisation—in academia and beyond.

This does not imply that any attempt that combines several strategies is destined to succeed. Clearly, many other factors were at play in the case of Rafah Garden—earlier organising efforts, clear demands, a communication channel with university management, and a certain readiness to negotiate by the latter. These conditions may not always be present. For example, the recent crackdown on academic freedom by the Trump regime in the US underscores difficulties for academic organising under fascist governments, including heightened pressures on university managers to comply with authoritarian policies (Blinkley & Offenhartz, 2025), and the urgent need for activists to protect especially vulnerable individuals from arrest, deportation or other forms of violence (Offenhartz, 2025). In other words, the power dynamics within a particular context are crucial when pushing for transformation. The strategic canvas does not explicitly address these and helps to gain only a partial understanding of why particular initiatives have succeeded or failed. Analysis of power dynamics to explain successes and failures of transformative efforts is an important

direction for future studies of strategy, and a space for further enriching the canvas we have built on here, in pursuit of degrowth and decolonisation.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Funding

The authors did not receive any funding for this research.

Acknowledgements

We thank an anonymous member of Studerende Mod Besættelsen for providing a photo of the Rafah Garden encampment's closing ceremony. We are also grateful to Nikoline Borgermann and Laura Horn for their helpful input during the early brainstorming stages of the manuscript, to Jens Friis Lund for his comments on a draft, to Lasse Steffens for copy editing, to our editor Peter Sutoris, and to our two reviewers—Anna Pagani and Richard Bärnthaler—for their deep engagement with the text. Finally, we thank the members of all movements and collectives mentioned in the text, for your efforts in helping build a just and sustainable world.

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