



BOOK REVIEW

In search of both vision and strategy for degrowth

*A review of **The future is degrowth: A guide to a world beyond capitalism***

Noortje Keurhorst ^a

^a Post-Growth Innovation Lab, University of Vigo, Spain
Email address: noortjemarie.keurhorst@uvigo.gal

Information

Received 30 May 2022

Accepted 30 November 2022

Online 20 October 2023

Keywords

Degrowth

post-capitalism

transformation

counter-hegemony

Schmelzer, M., Vetter, A., & Vansintjan, A. (2022). *The future is degrowth: A guide to a world beyond capitalism*. Verso Books. ISBN 9781839765841.

More than 1,000 texts have been published about degrowth in the last fifteen years, yet a thorough synthesis complementing the recent inventory of degrowth policy proposals by Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) was missing. Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan's *The Future is Degrowth* fills this gap by providing an extensive account of degrowth, spanning from its visions to policy proposals to bottom-up strategies. The book is laid out as follows: Chapter 1 serves as an introduction, Chapter 2 gives a comprehensive definition of growth, Chapter 3 critiques growth from seven different perspectives, Chapter 4 elaborates different currents of degrowth and combines the different critiques and visions to formulate a holistic definition of degrowth, Chapter 5 suggests actions to get to a degrowth future, Chapter 6 shares examples of transformational strategies, and finally, Chapter 7

considers the gaps that degrowth still needs to address. In this book review, I will briefly summarize the chapters before providing some final reflections on the book.

In Chapter 1 the authors define degrowth as “a proposal for a radical reorganization of society that leads to a drastic reduction in the use of energy and resources and that is deemed necessary, desirable, and possible” (p. 3). They then define economic growth in Chapter 2, a step that is often omitted by growth proponents. The authors emphasize that economic growth should be seen as *an idea* that was popularized in the 1950s as a way of measuring and comparing progress between nations, as a *social process* whereby growth is required for the dynamic stabilization of capitalism, and finally, as a *material process*, that increasingly uses up flows of energy and matter to build up stocks or to be released as waste.

Following this definition of growth, in Chapter 3, the authors proceed to critique growth based on ‘**seven emancipatory strands**’ that have thus far not been connected and synthesized in degrowth literature (p. 177). These include the **ecological** critique affirming that “infinite economic growth is not possible on a finite planet” (p. 79), this is based to a large degree on the work of Georgescu-Roegen (1971) who integrated biophysics into our understanding of the economy. The ecological critique therefore proposes “building a world of sufficiency that satisfies both material needs of all and planetary boundaries – well-being within limits” (p. 93). The **socio-economic** critique raises the question about the relationship between GDP growth and wellbeing that has often been overlooked, especially in the Global North (p. 94). Whilst economic recession may indeed result in crisis and hardship in our current economic set-up, the authors propose alternative hedonism as a way to cultivate new desires that would encourage sustainable modes of consumption (see Soper, 2008). The next critique is the **cultural** critique which focuses on the ways that the growth narratives are internalized and may lead to alienation (see Marx, 1932), that is, the separation of the worker from the product of their work, or as popularized recently by David Graeber as “bullshit jobs” (2018). Instead, the authors emphasize the importance of conviviality as “forms of social organization that enable mutual dependencies, the negotiation of interpersonal relationships, and good coexistence” (p. 116). The next critique concerns **capitalism** itself and its necessity to constantly compete and expand, and thereby appropriate and commodify what lies “outside it”. Often overlooked in the degrowth literature, Schmelzer et al. highlight a **feminist** critique

of growth, emphasizing the reproductive labour that remains undervalued in a capitalist society (see Gibson-Graham, 2013). This critique points to activities that exist outside ‘the economy’, namely those that sustain life and make the market economy and growth possible in the first place. Subsequently, the critique of **industrialism** concerns itself with the technological development and the way it serves economic growth, while at the same time making societies more “authoritarian and restrictive of self-determination” (p. 143). Finally, the **North-South** critique emphasizes “colonialism, exploitation, and dispossession in the South” (p. 159), a process that persists to the present day in discourses of “development” and prosperity.

In Chapter 4, the authors describe degrowth visions pertaining to the following **five currents**: institution-oriented, sufficiency-oriented, commoning and alternative economy, feminist, and finally post-capitalist and alter-globalization. The **institution-oriented current** considers the transformation of “growth-dependent and growth-driving institutions through reforms and policies of sufficiency” (p. 182). The authors refer to Amsterdam’s long-term sustainability policy, guided by Kate Raworth’s doughnut economy thinking, as an example. The **sufficiency-oriented current** aims to radically reduce resource consumption through local, decommodified economic activity and voluntary simplicity, focusing on consumer-driven prefigurative action outside of political institutions. Initiatives like the Global Ecovillage Network and the Transition Town movement are examples of collectives guided by the sufficiency approach. Meanwhile, the **commoning or alternative economy current** is concerned with the “construction of alternative infrastructures, cooperatives based on solidarity, and non-capitalist forms of collective production and livelihood” (p. 185), as a counterhegemonic and “nowtopian” practice, aimed at overthrowing the capitalist economy. The **feminist current** proposes a “care revolution” that places reproductive activities and care “at the center of the economy and economic thinking” (p. 188), arguing that a degrowth world can only be possible if patriarchal structures are dismantled. Finally, **post-capitalist and alter-globalization currents** emphasize the need for “fundamental structural changes – from the way we work to forms of ownership – [that] will require social struggle to achieve” (p. 189), in particular aiming at socializing key sectors of the economy like energy and agriculture. This current calls for direct action, civil disobedience, and other confrontational strategies to dismantle certain industrial sectors.

After elucidating the different critiques and visions of degrowth, the authors transform degrowth's common definition (p. 3) into an all-encompassing one. They define a degrowth society as one in which "a democratic process of transformation [that]:

1. enables *global ecological justice* – in other words, it transforms and reduces its material metabolism, extending from production to consumption, in such a way that its way of life is ecologically sustainable in the long term and globally just;
2. strengthens *social justice* and *self-determination* and strives for a *good life* for all under the conditions of this changed metabolism; and
3. redesigns its institutions and infrastructure so that they are *not dependent on growth and continuous expansion* for their functioning." (p. 195)

The first pillar of this definition extends the ecological critique of growth to incorporate principles of other critiques like the socio-economic critique and the North-South critique by connecting ecological debt and the overdevelopment of the Global North to the extreme overexploitation of the Global South. The second pillar merges several critiques to propose "undoing broader structures of domination such as class society, racism, colonialism, (hetero-)sexism, ableism and other forms of exclusion" (p. 202). The concept of "self-determination" put forth by Cornelius Castoriadis complements the notion of social justice as it provides the antidote to the alienation through work analyzed by the cultural and industrial critiques. Additionally, degrowth strives for the conditions for a good life for all based on a holistic understanding of prosperity. Central concepts to the good life are "resonance, conviviality, and time prosperity" (p. 204). The final part of Schmelzer et al.'s (2022) definition of degrowth concerns itself with growth independence, based on various growth critiques "that show how fundamentally today's societies are intertwined with growth and expansion of their material, institutional, and social infrastructure" (p. 205).

The degrowth utopia, like the layered definition hints at, does not consist of one simple vision and less so of a single path that leads there. Rather, the authors emphasize that degrowth requires experimenting with different policies and actions centering around "non-reformist reforms" (André Gorz) or "revolutionary Realpolitik" (Rosa Luxemburg) that refer to "reformist measures that increase popular power and provoke a destabilization and

reorientation of growth-oriented structures” (p. 214). To do so, in Chapter 5, they suggest six clusters of action, namely: (1) democratization, solidarity economy, and commoning; (2) social security, redistribution, and caps on income and wealth, in particular through unconditional basic income; (3) convivial and democratic technology (following the critique of industrialism) based on Ivan Illich’s conceptualization of convivial technology; (4) a revalorization and redistribution of labor mainly by radically reducing working hours and ensuring meaningful work; (5) equitable dismantling and reconstruction of production in a democratic way; (6) and international solidarity to consider the international character of degrowth and associated power structures.

Given the critiques, currents, visions, and actions that the authors argue degrowth is comprised, Chapter 6 starts with the question “How would we align social movements, technological change, the economy, and our political systems?” (p. 251). The friction within degrowth between top-down policy reforms (e.g. shorter working hours) and the “nowtopias” enacted outside or even against the state (e.g. autonomous spaces) is bridged in this chapter by using Erik Olin Wright’s three transformation strategies (*interstitial*, *symbiotic*, and *ruptural* strategies). These strategies have different approaches to change and operate in different spheres of action to construct a counter-hegemony to the current reign of growth. Nowtopias are forms of *interstitial strategies* as they are alternative institutions that “allow people to test changes to institutions, infrastructures, or forms of social organization in the cracks of capitalism” (p. 254). Non-reformist reforms are *symbiotic strategies*, which can be understood as “gradual change of laws, norms, infrastructures, and institutions, starting from and building on today’s structures” (p. 263). Finally, counter-hegemony is part of the *ruptural strategies*, which refer to “mass movements attempting to overcome the dominant social system through revolutionary confrontation and taking down or taking over the state” (p. 254).

In order to imagine the future of degrowth, the authors outline a few gaps within degrowth scholarship that require elaboration. Firstly, degrowth tends to focus on ecological issues from a “class-blind and consumer focused perspective that downplays social issues and fundamentally depoliticizes degrowth” (p. 289). More work should be done on the mechanisms of exclusion that drive the growth machine through the lens of class and race.

Additionally, the geopolitical ramifications of what degrowth envisions are not neutral, they come with political-economic effects on international relations and communities in the Global South (p. 291). The third issue that degrowth must deliberate further is its relationship with digitalization. Particularly, Platform Cooperativism and cooperation with peer-to-peer movements are potential avenues for degrowth to consider regarding the democratic challenges of digitalization. Finally, degrowth needs to consider further “what exactly “planning for degrowth” could look like, given the fact that degrowth favours decentralized structures over hierarchical and bureaucratic centralized ones” (p. 295).

Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan provide a compelling synthesis of the degrowth literature by connecting atomized streams of thought into a persuasive argument as to why *The Future is Degrowth*. They explain: “our goal has been to show that degrowth poses a set of key questions that all emancipatory alternatives need to address, which are often ignored. Degrowth offers answers to them as well. If people want to know how to address the challenges of ecological destruction, the ideology of capitalism, or the industrial, hierarchical, and imperial mode of production, degrowth is much more advanced than many other realms of debate” (p.297). The book is written for an academic audience and although it offers elaborate visions and pathways for degrowth, at times its proposals lack explanation about the exact *how* of degrowth. For example, complementarity between Wright’s transformational strategies (*interstitial, symbiotic, ruptural*) forms the basis of Chapter 6, yet what their interplay would look like in practice remains abstract and vague. To conclude, *The Future is Degrowth* provides a substantial synthesis of degrowth thinking that invites further thought as to the practical necessities and implications of the proposed transformation.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

Funding

The author did not receive any funding for this research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Elisa Schramm for her input and support. Additionally, I would like to thank Ben Robra and the editors of Degrowth Journal for giving me the opportunity to engage with an interesting book.

References

- Fitzpatrick, N., Parrique, T., & Cosme, I. (2022). Exploring degrowth policy proposals: A systematic mapping with thematic synthesis. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 132764.
- Georgescu-Roegen, N. (1971). *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K., Cameron, J., & Healy, S. (2013). *Take back the economy: An ethical guide for transforming our communities*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs*. Simon & Schuster.
- Marx, K. [1932] (1992) Economic and philosophical manuscripts (1844). In: Marx, K. (ed.), *Early Writings*. Chippenham, Wiltshire: Penguin Books.
- Schmelzer, M., Vetter, A., & Vansintjan, A. (2022). *The future is degrowth: A guide to a world beyond capitalism*. Verso Books.
- Soper, K. (2014). Alternative hedonism, cultural theory and the role of aesthetic revisioning. In: *Cultural Studies and Anti-Consumerism*. 59-79. Routledge.

The author

Noortje Keurhorst is a PhD Candidate at the Post-Growth Innovation Lab, University of Vigo, Spain, exploring historical commons for post-growth transformation.