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Eurocentrism, development, and the challenge of decolonization: Notes on the 2025 Degrowth Conference

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Abstract
This article reflects on the 2025 International Degrowth Conference in Oslo, highlighting the tensions revealed in its treatment of Eurocentrism and "development alternatives." It argues, first, that degrowth is Eurocentric, since it is rooted in critiques of capitalist modernity from the North; however, this does not preclude dialogue with the South as it can serve as a resource among other critical traditions. Secondly, the article contends that degrowth must move beyond blaming the North alone, by also interrogating the complicity of Southern states, elites, and NGOs in sustaining extractivism and dependency. Drawing on postdevelopment, decolonial thought, and Ivan Illich's notion of the *war on subsistence*, the article argues that one of the central tasks of degrowth should be to confront the coloniality of development itself, rather than simply managing scale. It concludes that degrowth embodies contradictory impulses—between critique and reproduction—and that its relevance depends on orienting material downscaling toward concrete alliances with pluriversal, decolonial struggles.

1. Introduction

The 2025 International Ecological Economics and Degrowth Conference in Oslo, Norway, marked an important moment of reckoning for the degrowth debate. While the conference was in many ways similar to previous iterations—with multiple sessions and broad and specific debates about the many issues of degrowth—it brought to the table a few discussions that have been haunting the degrowth debate, but have yet to be reconciled: the Eurocentric origins of degrowth and how it approaches the so-called 'Global South'. This is to say that, although degrowth has gained considerable momentum across Europe, its engagement with the Global South remains hesitant and uneven (Lang, 2024; Nirmal & Richaleau, 2020;

Rodríguez Lubajos et al., 2019; Schmeler et al, 2023). On the one hand, the event offered vibrant discussions—on reparations, alternatives to growth, money, and definitions of well-being—that reflected the creativity and richness of degrowth studies. On the other hand, two of the main plenaries[1]—*Is degrowth Eurocentric?* (Muradian et al., 2025) and *The way forward: Transformation strategies and tactics* (Raworth et al., 2025)—revealed some tensions that warrant closer reflection.

The first plenary centered on a highly debated question: Is degrowth inherently Eurocentric, grounded in Northern experiences and categories? Somewhat unexpectedly, several panelists argued that it is not (Muradian et al., 2025). In the closing session, the discussion shifted toward the role of states in the Global South, with some claiming that these governments still require "space for development," or that, in the context of rising Western imperialist aggressions—such as recent U.S. actions toward Venezuela (O'Connell, 2025)—it becomes problematic to criticize developmental policies pursued as struggles for liberation and/or national sovereignty (Raworth et al., 2025).[2] Building on these exchanges, I aim to foreground certain critiques and tensions, contributing to this important and ongoing debate.

This disregard for postdevelopment perspectives in degrowth discussions is troubling, especially considering the direct influence postdevelopment had on its establishment (Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997; see also, Sachs, 1992/2010). There is no doubt that the North bears a historic and ongoing responsibility for colonizing the atmosphere and for continuing to extract value from the South (Hickel et al., 2021; Hickel et al., 2022). Yet, a more nuanced analysis is needed—one that not only examines how colonial forms of war and domination

[1] Recordings of all the plenaries are available here: https://isee-degrowth2025.no/recordings.

[2] For example, Ajl (2023) has argued that recent political ecology—particularly around extractivism, postdevelopment, and degrowth—has retreated from its anti-imperialist, class-based foundations. For Ajl, "extractivism" is too often treated as a generic pathology (where everything can become extractivism) blurring distinctions between appropriation and exploitation and obscuring the imperial structuring of capitalism. By moralizing the role of the state and rejecting sovereign industrialization as a path to delinking from monopoly capital, Ajl argues that much of this literature reproduces liberal critiques of development. Ajl also faults postdevelopment and pluriversal approaches for romanticizing local autonomy while neglecting the need for political sovereignty and planning, he critiques degrowth for its Eurocentrism and susceptibility to co-optation by green capitalism. While Ajl's intervention rightly re-centers imperialism and dependency, his critique of extractivism downplays the complicity of the 'left' and 'progressive' governments with developmentalist ideals, as well as the colonial underpinnings of development (for a critique see: Duran Matute & Feliz, 2023; Esteva, 2022; Tornel & Dunlap, 2025).

manifest in the geographical North, but also how they persist in the South, including through the internalization of colonial logics, as explored by Fanon (1952/1986) and Maldonado-Torres (2025). Following Bajpai and Kothari (2023), the Global South should be understood as a space rendered subaltern by capitalist modernity. This means that, much like the Global North, it cannot be reduced to a neatly bound geographical region. Rather, there are many 'norths' in the south and vice versa. In this article, what we refer to as 'the Global South' encompasses peoples and places rendered invisible, violently dispossessed, or marginalized by capitalist modernity—whether they are located in the *geographical North* or *South*. In contrast, 'the Global North' here refers to peoples and places that follow what Brand and Wissen (2021) define as the *Imperial mode of living*—patterns of production, consumption, and mobility that rely on the systematic externalization of social and ecological costs.

As debates on decolonization become more visible within degrowth, intention matters. This is especially true as rage and passion are indispensable political affects in a context of ongoing wars of elimination and genocide—as the one Israel, backed by most of Global North, is conducting in Palestine (Grove, 2019; Illouz, 2024; Nijim, 2023; Shaw, 2025)—and wars of attrition against Indigenous peoples and communities across the Global South (Coulthard, 2014; Dunlap, 2023; EZLN, 2015; Simpson, 2016). Yet, when captured by identity, such affects can be misdirected against allied movements rather than towards building counterhegemonic coalitions. In this spirit, I offer the following reactions to the conference and reflections on a wider debate—not to belittle, but to extend a hand toward careful and collaborative debate.

This article advances two main arguments. First, yes, degrowth is Eurocentric. I argue that it could hardly be otherwise, since the very paradigm of growth emerged from the construction of capitalist modernity: the ideology of teleological progress, the separation of nature and culture, and a narrowly defined universalism attributed to the Global North (Schmeler et al., 2023; Tornel, 2023). If growth is Eurocentric, then the critique offered by degrowth is essential towards cultivating a transition towards other worldviews, practices, and struggles that reject this modern constitution of modernity. However, acknowledging the Eurocentric origins of growth and the critique of degrowth does not mean that degrowth should be discarded in the South. On the contrary, it can be one among several conceptual resources for resisting capitalist modernity, even if it is articulated in different words and practices

across contexts. To be fair to the speakers (Muradian et al., 2025) on the Oslo panel, this may have been their intent, though their insistence on calling degrowth "not Eurocentric" obscures the point. In my view and following others like Escobar (2015) and Kothari and colleagues (2019), it is better to accept degrowth's Eurocentric origins while still engaging with it critically and strategically in relation to other non-modern critiques, struggles, and processes rejecting capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Moving onto the second argument, I take issue with a tendency to cast the South solely as a victim of imperialism, without critically engaging with how Southern governments, elites, NGOs, and other actors have actively collaborated and reproduced the growth paradigm and its colonial, patriarchal, and extractivist logics. This complicity has not only sustained dependency but also intensified what Illich (1981) called the *war on subsistence*: the systematic destruction of autonomous ways of living.

The last section of this article explores how revisiting degrowth today without grappling with these well-known challenges risks repeating old mistakes. If degrowth is to move beyond a Northern critique of growth, as suggested by Nirmal and Rochelau (2019), Burkhart and colleagues (2020), and Cabaña Alvear and Vandana (2023), it must reckon with the colonial histories of dispossession and the failed promises of Southern developmentalism. Degrowth, this article contends, must also listen to insurgent alternatives emerging from below—Indigenous movements, feminist economies of care, and struggles for territorial autonomy—that embody resistance and re-existence. These practices point toward post-growth horizons that refuse the universalizing and homogenizing tendencies of capitalist modernity, while gesturing toward a pluriversal politics of transition (Escobar, 2015).

2. Degrowth, development, and the war on subsistence (revised)

The tensions exposed in Oslo are not new. They echo earlier debates from the 2018 Degrowth Conference in Mexico. Organized for the first time in the Global South, the event confronted a crucial question: Could "degrowth"—a concept forged in Europe through critiques of ecological economics and "post-industrial" societies—resonate in regions where "growth" had meant not affluence but dispossession? Could one meaningfully speak of degrowth where basic needs remain unmet, and where development and industrialization have long

been promised, however illusorily, as a route out of poverty? These debates converged on a central dilemma: Should countries in the Global South embrace degrowth at all?

The discussions made clear that degrowth could not simply be transplanted from the Global North to the South. Doing so risks repeating the colonial gesture of universalism—imposing a single horizon of critique while erasing the heterogeneity of Southern experiences (Garcia-Arias et al., 2025). Similarly, framing degrowth as an "umbrella term" (Parrique, 2019) for diverse struggles may build alliances but risks reproducing the same universalist tendency that postdevelopment critiques have long exposed. As Gustavo Esteva (2018) noted in his introduction to the Spanish edition of *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, degrowth is not a popular movement. It is neither a mass political force nor a widely shared conceptual language; rather, it remains largely confined to academic and activist circles already in dialogue with European debates. By contrast, what resonated far more deeply in Mexico were the critiques of development articulated since the 1970s: Postdevelopment, autonomy, *Buen Vivir*, and, above all, the defense of material, epistemic, and ontological forms of subsistence against incursions by the market and the state.

This tension is longstanding. For example, Nirmal and Rochelau (2021) argued for the decolonization of degrowth, while Rodríguez-Labajos and colleagues (2019) cautioned against assuming a "natural alliance" between Southern grassroots struggles and Northern degrowth discourses. Here lies the first crucial wedge between degrowth's Northern genealogy and the lived realities of the Global South. In the North, degrowth is often defined as a planned reduction of material and energy throughput to stay within planetary boundaries. Yet others—including Latouche (2007/2010) and Burkhart and colleagues (2020)—have gestured toward a broader horizon: societies grounded in values of simplicity, conviviality, and frugal abundance. Latouche (2014), for instance, emphasized principles of mutual aid, reciprocity, solidarity, and *autogestión* [self-organization] that challenge the capitalist assumption that scarcity can only be overcome through perpetual growth. Such values open the way for dialogue with postdevelopment alternatives such as *Comunalidad*, *Ubuntu*, and *Swaraj* among many others (see, Kothari et al., 2019). The postdevelopment approach to degrowth offers an important, if ignored, bridge towards placing struggle at its core.

For many in the South, these values are more relevant than aggregate reductions in material throughput or greenhouse gas emissions (important as those are). The central issue is not shrinking economies but defending ways of life systematically attacked by capitalist modernity and its obsession with growth. This obsession, as Esteva (1990/2010) argued, produced the humiliating and colonial formulation of "development." While material and energy throughput must indeed decline in several Southern economies, the deeper challenge lies in confronting what Maldonado-Torres (2017, 2025)—building on Fanon (1952/1986) and Wynter (2003)—has called the *coloniality of being*. The coloniality of being extends Fanon's insight that colonization produces zones of "non-being"—groups systematically denied full humanity. It generates symbolic and material hierarchies along the "color line," marking certain lives as less human and less worthy. Postdevelopment scholarship revealed how development not only continued the colonial project in the so-called postcolonial era but actively deepened this coloniality, sustaining internal and settler colonialisms through the logics of power and knowledge. As Turner (2018) argues, development was forged through colonial violence and racism, linking the subjugation of colonized populations with the biopolitical management of life in the metropolis. This dynamic shaped diverse modes of colonialism that simultaneously repressed struggles for independence while reorganizing domination and control across both the colonies and the imperial center. Here, the coloniality of being distorts people's self-image and worldview, maintaining humiliation and extraction through the binary of development/underdevelopment.

The notion of the *war on subsistence*, developed by Ivan Illich (1981) and later by Jean Robert (2009/2018) and Esteva (2022), thus becomes indispensable. Illich argued that modern industrial society operates not only by producing goods and services but also by destroying people's capacity to subsist autonomously. Modern institutions—schools, hospitals, highways, energy grids—create what he called "radical monopolies": systems that deliver services while simultaneously rendering alternatives impossible. Once learning is redefined as compulsory schooling, learning outside of a school is devalued or even criminalized. Once mobility is organized around cars, walking or cycling becomes unsafe or obsolete. Beyond certain thresholds, institutions cross into what Illich termed *paradoxical counterproductivity:* They undermine the very goals they claim to serve.

From this perspective, the history of development in the South is less a story of poverty alleviation than a systematic assault on vernacular subsistence economies. As Esteva (2022) observed, development "modernizes poverty": It displaces people from self-sufficient livelihoods and redefines them as either "needy" or "poor," or dependent on state, expert, or market institutions (Sachs, 1992/2010). The *campesino* [country person] who grows food for their family is reclassified as underemployed; the role of the midwife becomes unskilled labor; "the commons" is deemed as idle land; and nature is reframed as stocks and flows of potential. Development thus creates needs where sufficiency once existed, positioning the state or the market as the only entities capable of satisfying them. Robert (2017) extended this insight, showing how the idea of scarcity is socially manufactured to sustain material accumulation: Capital produces value by producing devaluation. It destroys existing forms of life so they can be replaced by commodified substitutes. This is the war on subsistence: Every advance of development eradicates the possibility of living outside the economy.

Challenging development and dependency is therefore a messy and urgent task. In Latin America, the experience of the "Pink Tide" illustrated how progressivist governments relied on extractivism as their material base, consolidating new elites, militarizing dissent, engineering consent, and deepening dispossession (Svampa, 2019). Their role was not to dismantle extractive capitalism but to manage it more efficiently, absorbing popular energies while expanding control mechanisms (Machado & Zibechi, 2017). Gaudichaud and colleagues (2022) make a similar point: Progressivism functioned as a passive revolution, incorporating movements into the state while preserving class and property structures. Redistribution was real but shallow, contingent on the commodities boom; when it ended, social gains evaporated while extractive frontiers expanded (Warnecke-Berger et al., 2023). This illustrates why the nation-state cannot be seen as the primary agent of degrowth but rather, as Tapia (2020) argues, as an epistemological obstacle: obscuring other imaginaries and possibilities of political, socioecological forms of work beyond this horizon. Instead, pathways must be built through non-reformist reforms, prefigurative politics, and practices of *autogestión* (Dunlap, 2025; Schmelzer et al., 2023).

Seen in this light, development is the modern extension of the enclosures Marx identified as capitalism's violent origins (Federici, 2004). Just as English peasants were expelled from

commons and forced into wage labor, Southern communities were displaced by dams, mines, and monocultures—then redefined as "needy beneficiaries" of development. For each round of dispossession creates new "needs," justifying further statist and (transnational) corporate interventions. Education requires more schools, healthcare more hospitals, mobility more highways—each producing new dependencies and vulnerabilities (Cayley, 2021). As Tornel and Dunlap (2025; see also, Dunlap, 2020) argue, modern institutions create and sustain dependency through the war on subsistence, deploying both "hard" techniques of coercion and "soft" techniques of persuasion—propaganda, consultations, and education.

While degrowth emerged from Eurocentric debates and has limited traction in the South (Gorz, 1989), it remains a relevant analytical resource. Revived as a "missile word" over a decade ago (D'Alisa, et al., 2014), it offers a powerful critique of capitalist modernity and an important ally for postdevelopment. As Escobar (2015) reminds us, such concepts should be seen as transitional discourses—bridges toward other ways of being, knowing, and inhabiting the world. The lack of engagement in Oslo, but generally within degrowth, with postdevelopment's critiques to the State, the war on subsistence, and colonization remains startling. To discuss "development alternatives" without acknowledging development's role as an instrument of colonial domination is to forget the central lesson of postdevelopment: that development is itself manufacturing the problem (Dunlap, 2024). Likewise, framing so-called 'developing countries' or the South as passive victims of (neo)imperialism (without discounting its very real role) risks erasing the complicity of Southern governments and elites in sustaining extractive models, deepening collapse, and repressing grassroots alternatives as we have seen repetitively happen in Latin America (Dunlap, 2023; Duran Matute & Féliz, 2023; Gaudichaud et al., 2022; Zibechi, 2017).

3. Beyond the North—degrowth as decolonial struggle

This brings us back to the last point. To discuss degrowth without engaging with the *war on subsistence* (Illich, 1981) is to miss the heart of the matter: the destruction of autonomy, the criminalization of sufficiency, the production of artificial needs, and the militarized defense of extractive frontiers. Degrowth cannot be reduced to a technical project of lowering energy and material throughput. It must be a political struggle against the systems that make us

dependent on endless growth in the first place. This means naming development itself as a colonial project and aligning with those who resist it in practice.

If the Oslo debates revealed the risk of reproducing Northern universalism, the challenge remains: What would it mean to articulate degrowth from the South? The answer cannot be to replicate Northern proposals—where "we" degrow so that "they" may develop. This formula rests on a dangerous assumption: that the South still "needs" development, and that degrowth's task is merely to create ecological space for it. Yet as Walter Rodney (1982), Gustavo Esteva (1990/2010), and Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (1997) remind us, there is no development without occupation, dispossession, and erasure. To argue for "development space" in the South, risks forgetting that development has never been a neutral or benign project and to reinscribe the very logic of coloniality that has long framed it as deficient—perpetually catching up to Northern standards.

This is why Miriam Lang (2024) insists that the crucial step is not only to reduce economic throughput in the North, but to delink from the development paradigm itself. In Latin America, economic growth has not alleviated poverty; it has concentrated wealth among elites, dismantled economies of subsistence, and devastated nature with *terricidal* means [bridging ethnocide, ecocide, and genocide] (Durán Matute & Féliz, 2023; Millán, 2024). From this perspective, degrowth cannot be a universal blueprint (Escobar, 2015; Kotheri et al., 2019). It must instead be understood as part of a pluriversal horizon: a constellation of place-based struggles articulating their own visions of autonomy and convivial limits. These practices operate in, against, and beyond the state, illuminating pathways of autonomy while confronting capitalist modernity's violent logics. This is not a call for homogeneity but for radical heterogeneity—an alliance of struggles against the regime of scarcity imposed by capital and reinforced by state complicity. The horizon of degrowth is thus multiple, irreducible, and heterogeneous. As Japhy Wilson (2022), Alexander Dunlap (2025), and Richard Seymour (2024) suggest, there are common 'universal' denominators that cut across this multiplicity: struggle and organization against capitalist modernity.

The question of the state illustrates a central tension in degrowth debates. It cannot be ignored, yet efforts to transform it from within risk co-optation. Some, like D'Alisa and Kallis

(2020), view the state as an unavoidable terrain of struggle: Grassroots initiatives are essential, but structural change also requires state engagement. From a Gramscian perspective, the authors call for combining symbiotic reforms—such as maximum income or shorter working weeks—with interstitial strategies that cultivate alternatives outside the state. Tornel and Dunlap (2025) warn against "state romanticism," stressing that the state is rooted in colonial violence and produces needs and dependencies, echoing Illich's (1981) "modernization of poverty." Historical examples abound: Latin American "Pink Tide" governments absorbed popular energies while reproducing extractivism (Gaudichaud et al., 2022; Zibechi & Machado, 2023); in Europe, the state maintains rule by sustaining biopolitical regimes infoemd via colonialism (Turner, 2018) deploying counterinsurgency tactics and social engineering (Dunlap, 2024); in Asia, there is centralized power through homogenization and control. Öcalan (2020), for exmaple, higlights how the nation-state is inherently tied to violence, coercion, and hierarchy. Kothari (2023) highlights autonomous experiences such as Rojava, the Zapatistas, Indigenous struggles in the Americas and Australia, and village federations in central India as alternatives rooted in self-rule, direct democracy, and communal autonomy. While it is undoubtedly true that each region has its own political and territorial formation of the state—and while it can embody emancipatory projects (against colonial extermination), as in the Palestinian struggle (Ajl, 2024)—these perspectives underscore a central dilemma for degrowth: Can the state serve as an ally in transformation, or does real autonomy require moving beyond it altogether?

This is where the prefigurative politics of degrowth come into view. Illich's (1973) notion of *convivial tools* reminds us that technologies and institutions should remain under the control of their users and within limits that preserve autonomy. Applied politically, this means envisioning convivial limits: forms of governance built from below, oriented toward sufficiency rather than scarcity, reciprocity rather than extraction. Across Latin America, such practices already exist. Indigenous territorial defense movements articulate a politics of multiple territorialities, demanding recognition of many worlds within the same place, grounded in relational being (Oslender, 2019). Peasant movements, urban marginalized communities, and those displaced and made subaltern by capitalist modernity advance agroecology, food sovereignty, and energy autonomy as strategies to rebuild subsistence outside corporate supply chains (Esteva, 2022). As Durán Matute and Féliz (2022) argue, these

governments deploy discourses of democracy, social justice, and post-neoliberalism, but in practice deepen extractivism, militarization, and mechanisms of social control. The scholars further articulate that "the authoritarian nature of development policies has remained the backbone of progressive politics," as it rests on dispossession, "othering," and the violent reorganization of society for capital accumulation (2022, p. 197). Progressive governments sustain this by combining coercion (repression, militarization) with consensus (co-optation, social programs) to neutralize dissent. A consideration I would extend to most (if not all) governments of so-called developing countries. These struggles do not call for degrowth in GDP terms; they embody degrowth as resistance and *re-existence* (Hurtado Gómez & Porto-Gonçalves, 2022)—living otherwise despite the ruins of development. To decolonize degrowth is not simply to broaden its canon of references. It requires confronting the coloniality embedded in concepts like development, progress, sustainability, and even renewability.

Degrowth—understood as a transition strategy (Escobar, 2015)—converges with postdevelopment insights: The problem is not only scale but the very ontology of modernity. Modernity reduces life to resources, separates nature and society, and universalizes scarcity (Illich, 1981; Schmelzer et al., 2023). Dismantling this ontology opens space for the pluriverse and for relational ways of being that refuse the totalizing logic of capitalist modernity. From this vantage, the task is not for the South to "degrow" in the same way as the North, nor for the North to "make space" for Southern development. Degrowth must indeed entail material reductions—including in some sectors of the so-called 'developing countries' in South—alongside radical wealth redistribution. But the deeper challenge lies in what Gustavo Esteva (2022, p. 234) once called "taking off the glasses of development." Development does not simply frame the future; it sees through our eyes. It embodies the coloniality of being, capturing desires, imaginaries, and even the idea of the future itself—erasing people's histories, struggles, and knowledge in the process.

The task, then, is to weave a pluriversal degrowth: an alliance of struggles against the war on subsistence, against extractivism, and against the state-capital nexus that reproduces dependency. More explicitly, degrowth must be about material reductions in energy and throughput, but always in relation to concrete struggles for autonomy: defending Indigenous,

peasant, and other marginalized and affected territories against mining, resisting the militarization of peasant lands, reclaiming commons from privatization, and rebuilding economies of care and reciprocity. These struggles are not supplementary to degrowth; they are degrowth in practice.

4. Conclusions

This article argues that while degrowth is undeniably Eurocentric, it can nonetheless serve as a resource for dialogue from the South, provided its limitations are acknowledged. Rather than reproducing Northern universalism or treating the South solely as a victim, degrowth debates must grapple with the colonial histories and Southern complicities that sustain development. The focus should not only be on reducing material throughput in the North, but on challenging development itself as a colonial project and confronting the war on subsistence that erodes autonomy. By linking degrowth with postdevelopment critiques, Indigenous and feminist alternatives, and struggles for autonomy, the article calls for a pluriversal degrowth that resists both capitalist modernity and the state-capital nexus.

Degrowth has opened important radical spaces in a global context of civilizatory crisis—questioning growth, exposing imperial dependencies, and gesturing toward alternative futures. Yet it has not been able to fully ditch the colonial frameworks it seeks to transcend, by denying its Eurocentrism and rehabilitating “development space” for the South. As Anslem Jappe (2015) reminds us, degrowth cannot succeed if it limits itself to managing scale or material throughput. Its target must be the very core of capitalist modernity: the domination of abstract value, money, and labor as universal mediators of social life. Opening a debate with how degrowth can take place in the geographical south is an essential part of this discussion. Otherwise, degrowth risks becoming another adjustment to capitalism’s contradictions.

What follows from this is not a rejection of degrowth, but a reorientation. Degrowth must be approached as one resource among others, critically dialoguing with postdevelopment, anarchism, autonomy, and indigenous and feminist alternatives (Dunlap, 2022; Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). It must recognize both the imperial mode of living and its clear

responsibility for the climate crisis as well as the complicities in sustaining extractive models in the so-called Global South. It must take seriously the war on subsistence—the ongoing destruction of people's capacity to live autonomously—as the central battlefield. From this vantage, degrowth is most powerful not as a European export but as part of a pluriversal alliance of struggles against development, extractivism, and state dependency.

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