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Are we practising what we preach? The degrowth academic trap

Vasilis Kostakis [a,b]

[a] Tallinn University of Technology, Tallinn, Estonia
[b] Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States
Email address: vasileios.kostakis@taltech.ee

Abstract
As a degrowth scholar, I confront an uncomfortable irony: I built my early career through the very "growth" behaviours that degrowth scholarship critiques, i.e., publishing prolifically, accumulating citations, and competing for recognition and funding. This reflects a broader "degrowth academic trap" in which scholars committed to sufficiency, conviviality, and care find themselves rewarded for contradictory behaviours. Thus, it is not arbitrary to say that the field's exponential rise may mirror the growth patterns we critique. We build personal academic brands while preaching collective action, allow corporate oligopolies to commodify our critiques of capitalism, and compete within metrics-obsessed systems while advocating alternatives. Drawing from my trajectory—initially chasing conventional metrics before shifting toward participatory action research—I examine how structural pressures trap even critical scholars. I explore emerging alternatives: narrative CVs, triennial conferences, diamond open-access publishing, and other institutional experiments. The challenge remains whether we can collectively redesign academic structures to make degrowth principles professionally viable, ultimately embodying the sufficiency and care we advocate for broader society.

As I write this piece, I am acutely aware of an irony that will become apparent throughout. I find myself part of the problem I am critiquing: a degrowth/postgrowth scholar who has built an early career on the very "growth" behaviours that the field theoretically rejects. This personal contradiction reflects a broader realisation that degrowth academia may have become entrenched in the very growth-oriented systems it aims to transform. The exponential rise of degrowth scholarship itself mirrors the growth patterns we critique in the broader economy. The field has surged from zero publications in 2003 to thousands of peer-reviewed articles by 2025, while conference attendance has grown from 140 participants in

Paris in 2008 to over 1,000 in Oslo in 2025[1]. Although increased engagement is welcome, these patterns raise questions: Do we really need so many publications? Is there justification for established degrowth scholars to publish a book every year alongside numerous papers?

The contradictions run deeper still. We advocate for reduced material throughput while flying internationally to discuss carbon-intensive lifestyles. We compete for citations and h-index rankings while preaching sufficiency and care. We pursue publication in elite journals with notoriously low acceptance rates, chasing the prestige and career advancement such venues provide. Most paradoxically, we have allowed our critiques of capitalism to be commodified by the very corporate publishing oligopolies we oppose. As Robra and Parrique (2020) observe, "it is a tragic irony that we rely on capitalist firms to publish our critiques of capitalism." These examples are not meant to blame individuals but to understand our position and potentialities within the academic industry. We can do better.

1. The degrowth academic trap

Academic publishing has become a commodified system where corporate oligopolies charge for access to peer-reviewed knowledge while editing and reviewing labor is performed voluntarily. We critique Gross Domestic Production (GDP) reductionism while our scholarly worth is measured by impact factors and citation counts, surrendering to the "worship of a single number" (Robra & Parrique, 2020) that shapes academic knowledge production. Fleming (2021) demonstrates in *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* that even academics critiquing neoliberal university structures often internalise competitive logics, demanding citations and recognition from colleagues pursuing similar critiques of capitalism. Metrics-obsessed, hierarchical environments trap even critical scholars within competitive individualism.

So how do we transform the system when individual researchers face immediate career pressures that make defection both rational and often necessary for survival? Degrowth presents profound critiques of growth-oriented metrics and systems (Hickel, 2020; Kallis et

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[1] A list of all Degrowth conferences can be found here: https://degrowth.info/en/conferences.

al., 2018). The core principles—sufficiency, conviviality, and care—directly challenge the competitive individualism and quantitative reductionism dominating academic publishing. Yet degrowth scholarship often exhibits typical academic "growth" behaviours: proliferating publications, expanding institutional networks, and advancing individual careers through increased output and self-promotion on social media. The imperative to build a personal academic brand sits uneasily with degrowth's emphasis on collective action and humble engagement with knowledge.

My own career trajectory exemplifies these contradictions. Like many early-career scholars, I initially approached degrowth/post-growth scholarship through conventional metrics: focusing on journal publications, boosting citation counts, and engaging in academic networking to build individual credibility. The pressure to "publish or perish" led me to break down potentially impactful research into multiple short papers, prioritise quick publications over meaningful community engagement, and emphasise theoretical contributions over participatory action.

These behaviours are not merely individual shortcomings; they are structural responses to an academic system that rewards growth-oriented productivity over collaboration, care, and engagement. National research funding agencies have allocated billions based on publication metrics, university rankings heavily weigh research output, and tenure decisions often favor individual achievement rather than collaborative impact. Even Peter Higgs, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, noted that he "wouldn't get an academic job" under today's productivity expectations, which could have hindered his groundbreaking discoveries (Higgs in Aitkenhead, 2013). The practices most consistent with degrowth values—building student relationships, fostering embedded community involvement—often yield fewer measurable academic outputs within current evaluation timeframes.

All this creates a "degrowth academic trap," where scholars committed to degrowth principles find themselves rewarded for behaviours that contradict their theoretical commitments. Ironically, the more successful we become within existing academic systems, the further we may distance ourselves from the collaborative, community-engaged practices that degrowth advocates. This trap is acute for early-career researchers who, lacking the

security of tenure or prestigious grants, face immediate survival pressures that make practicing degrowth principles a professional risk they often cannot afford to take.

I do not advocate for wholesale rejection of academic publishing systems or social media engagement. Such purist positions would ignore the realities of contemporary scholarly life and risk marginalising degrowth voices from essential conversations. We must engage with existing platforms if we hope to reach broader audiences and contribute to meaningful transformation. However, the critical question remains: In the process, do we become alienated from our core work, estranged from the degrowth values we espouse, and disconnected from both our colleagues and ourselves?

The middle path requires neither uncritical embrace nor complete rejection, but rather conscious, reflective engagement that regularly examines whether our methods align with our values. This means asking ourselves whether each publication, conference presentation, or social media post brings us closer to or further from the world we claim to seek. Perhaps the answer lies not in abandoning these systems entirely, but in learning to inhabit them differently; with greater intentionality, deeper reflection, and commitment to the principles of sufficiency and care that degrowth champions. Yet this raises harder questions: What would degrowth-aligned scholarship actually look like in practice, from publication habits and research approaches to evaluation criteria? These questions require our collective imagination, to which I now turn my attention.

2. Practicing what we preach: Experiments in degrowth scholarship

Over the past seven years, I have gradually shifted towards alternative approaches that more closely align with degrowth principles. This transition was only possible because I received a starting grant from the European Research Council (ERC), which provided both the time and resources for my research group to pursue directions that prioritise depth over productivity. Yet this raises a tension: these grants are prestigious, competitive, and ostensibly individual achievements; precisely the kind of growth-oriented success the field critiques. Degrowth reminds us, however, that every product—whether a smartphone, a book, or an ERC grant— is fundamentally a social product. I secured this grant not through individual merit alone, but

thanks to family and institutions that cared for my children while I worked, a university that supported my earlier research, and colleagues who helped me navigate what obtaining such funding required.

This experience crystallises a crucial question: Who can actually afford to practice degrowth principles in academia? Such practices often remain a privilege reserved for those with secure positions or substantial funding. I share my experience here not as a universal solution—indeed, it highlights how degrowth-aligned scholarship often requires a privilege most academics lack—but rather to explore what alternative practices become possible when structural constraints temporarily lift.

With this security, I was consistently experimenting with approaches that might offer pathways for others under similar or different conditions. This shift began with recognising that participatory action research (PAR) and transformative pedagogy offer pathways for scholarship that prioritise depth over productivity and relationships over metrics. PAR celebrates collaborative knowledge production and democratic participation, involving community members as co-researchers addressing issues they identify as priorities (Cornish et al., 2023). This approach necessitates "slow scholarship," i.e., time for trust-building, skill-sharing, and consensus-building that cannot be rushed to meet publication deadlines (Mountz et al., 2015).

A key locus for our PAR work has been Epirus in northwestern Greece, the region where I come from. Rather than studying communities from afar, we joined forces with local actors to co-create degrowth-oriented alternatives. When exploring technology for degrowth, we partnered with small-scale farmers to co-establish a mountainous community-driven makerspace addressing local technological needs (Kostakis et al., 2023). When confronting energy poverty during the energy crisis, we worked with residents to facilitate one of Greece's first self-producing energy cooperatives connected to the national grid (Kostakis et al., 2024). Both organisations continue to operate today, serving as living laboratories, amidst contradictions, for degrowth-oriented transformations in real-world settings.

Applying degrowth principles to scholarship requires shifts across multiple dimensions. Quantitatively: producing fewer, more substantial contributions rather than maximising output. Relationally: shifting who we research with and for; integrating community perspectives as co-creators rather than subjects, embracing open-access platforms controlled by knowledge commons rather than corporations. Pedagogically: prioritising student development over instructional productivity through "slow pedagogy" that allows natural pacing for deep engagement (Clark, 2023). Temporally: honouring rhythms incompatible with productivity-driven systems—community partnerships developing over years, transformative teaching resisting content-coverage metrics, participatory research producing collective knowledge that defies individual attribution. While these represent starting points, we still need more concrete models of what truly degrowth-aligned publications, department evaluations, or research collaborations would look like in practice.

3. Structural change beyond individual choices

While acknowledging individual responsibility, we cannot ignore that academic reward systems create structural pressures making alternative approaches professionally risky, particularly for early-career scholars. Degrowth offers inspiration for addressing this tension: rather than expecting individual lifestyle changes, it advocates for policy frameworks and institutional redesign that make sustainable practices structurally supported rather than individually heroic (Kallis et al., 2018). Applied to academia, this requires coordinated efforts across multiple dimensions: from evaluation systems and funding mechanisms to conference culture and publishing practices. Recent experiments demonstrate how such transformations might unfold in practice.

To begin with, alternative evaluation systems require institutional adoption that moves beyond metrics-driven assessment. The narrative CV represents one promising approach, enabling researchers to contextualise achievements, broaden the spectrum of valued contributions, and foster diversity and inclusion (Bordignon et al., 2023). Rather than relying on publication counts and impact factors, narrative CVs invite candidates to explain their intellectual choices, emphasise research interests, and highlight contributions beyond

traditional outputs, e.g., community engagement, teaching innovation, and collaborative impact (Varga & Kaltenbrunner, 2025).

Several funding agencies have piloted this approach. The Dutch Research Council introduced narrative CVs in 2018 for early-career researchers, while the Swiss National Science Foundation and the ERC have adopted a hybrid format combining structured information with contextualised narratives (Strinzel et al., 2022). The UK Research and Innovation, Canadian research councils, and the Luxembourg National Research Fund have also adopted narrative CV templates across funding programmes. While feedback reveals both enthusiasm and challenges—particularly regarding increased workload and concerns about comparability—these experiments demonstrate national- and international-scale implementation of qualitative peer review prioritising research merit over journal prestige (Bordignon et al., 2023; Varga & Kaltenbrunner, 2025).

Beyond evaluation reform, some institutions are experimenting with more fundamental repurposing. The Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of British Columbia hosted a Climate and Nature Emergency Catalyst Program (2022-2023) that challenged traditional ivory tower models. Rather than funding individual scholarly "genius," the programme created six cohorts including faculty, students, artists, emerita, and staff, emphasising genuinely collaborative, transdisciplinary research grounded in principles of ethical collaboration, intellectual depth, reparative redistribution, and engagement with Indigenous strategic plans (Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2025). Similarly, collaborations between the University of the Forest, a Huni Kui Indigenous centre of wisdom in the Brazilian Amazon, and Western institutions demonstrate possibilities for repurposing higher education toward intergenerational and interspecies responsibility (Racimo et al., 2025; Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2025). The University of the Forest's international digital campus, developed with the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, organises learning around five faculties addressing respect, reverence, reciprocity, responsibility, and regeneration. These collaborations require Western institutions to redistribute funds, build equitable partnerships, and develop educational experiences that interrupt modern patterns of extraction and consumption (Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2025).

Further, transforming conference culture requires concrete commitments. The degrowth movement could shift to triennial conferences, following successful models like the International Council of Museums' Committee for Conservation, which attracts 1,000 professionals every three years[2] while achieving deeper research development and reduced environmental impact. Such extended cycles enable months-long collaborative preparation, where participants develop curricula together and prioritise hands-on learning over passive presentations.

Publishing practices also demand transformation. We could withdraw from associations whose journals align with major commercial publishers and support initiatives like the Subscribe-to-Open model,[3] enabling scholarly societies to maintain quality while eliminating both reader barriers and author charges through collective funding. As a mid-ground solution, small publishers aligned with specific disciplines—such as the 4,000-member EASA's collaboration with Berghahn—offer replicable templates.[4] More radically, coordinated boycotts of the tiered journal hierarchy, following the University of California system's cancellation of $11 million in annual Elsevier subscriptions (Kell, 2019), challenge the perpetuation of voluntary labour for profit-driven publishers.

The creation of this journal represents one such effort, providing institutional support for alternative scholarly practices. The *Degrowth Journal* explicitly challenges conventional academic publishing by operating as a scholar-led, diamond open-access publication that refuses to commodify knowledge or impose article processing charges. As articulated in its manifesto, the journal seeks to embody degrowth principles within academia itself, recognising that "the practices and institutions of knowledge production are not separate from, but rather deeply implicated in, the social and ecological crises we face" (Degrowth Journal, 2025). However, these examples illustrate that journal creation alone is insufficient—fundamental transformation requires coordinated action across evaluation systems, institutional missions, and knowledge dissemination practices.

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[2] https://www.icom-cc.org/.
[3] https://royalsociety.org/news/2025/08/subscribe-to-open/.
[4] https://easaonline.org/social-anthropology-anthropologie-sociale/.

4. Transforming academic work, transforming society

The challenge facing degrowth scholarship is whether we can redesign the structures that currently reward growth-oriented behaviours while marginalising patient, collaborative work aligned with our values. If we cannot model sufficiency, conviviality, and care in our own scholarly practices, how can we credibly advocate for these principles in broader society? Transforming the conditions of academic work is inseparable from transforming wider political-economic structures. The structural pressures we face—publish or perish, compete for metrics, commodify knowledge—reflect the same growth-oriented logic that drives ecological breakdown and social inequality beyond university walls. When we challenge an exclusively metrics-driven evaluation, we challenge the broader tendency to reduce complex achievements to single quantifiable measures: whether GDP, productivity targets, or academic rankings. When we resist knowledge commodification, we contest the same enclosure logic operating throughout the economy. Academic reform is not separate from systemic transformation; it is integral to it.

The proposals outlined here offer starting points for individual and collective action. They require neither wholesale rejection of academic systems nor individual heroism, but coordinated efforts to create institutional alternatives that make degrowth principles structurally viable rather than professionally suicidal. Yet we cannot transform these structures through scholarship alone. This requires active engagement in faculty unions, professional associations, and cross-institutional coalitions, showing up where employment contracts, evaluation criteria, and institutional priorities are contested. The irony I began with will persist until we find the courage and imagination to practise what we preach; not perfectly, but persistently. Our students and fellow citizens learn not just from what we say, but from how we choose to live and work.

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The author

Vasilis Kostakis is a Professor of Technology Governance and Sustainability at TalTech, Estonia, and a Faculty Associate at Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center. He is also the Founder of the P2P Lab and a founding member of both the Tzoumakers rural makerspace and the CommonEn energy cooperative, all based in his hometown of Ioannina, Greece. Vasilis is also the director of TheOtherSchool.art, a science popularisation project.