



## ESSAY

# Anarchism and degrowth: deepening degrowth's engagement with autonomous movements

## Reflections from the 8th International Degrowth Conference in The Hague 2021

AKC Collective\*

\* See author statement for affiliations  
Corresponding author: Jacob Smessaert  
Email addresses: j.d.a.smessaert@uu.nl

### Information

Received 16 May 2022  
Accepted 13 December 2022  
Online 03 May 2023

### Keywords

anti-capitalism  
statism  
political transformation  
movement alliances

*"Each economic phase of life implies its own political phase; and it is impossible to touch the very basis of the present economic life ... without a corresponding change in the very basis of the political organization." (Kropotkin, 1970 [1927], p. 68)*

## 1. Introduction

Degrowth points to the need for a radical transformation of the economic system if humanity is to avoid the existential risk of wide-ranging ecological collapse. It stresses that the imperative of growth, which is so fundamental to most modern societies, is at the root of the intertwined ecological, social and economic crises of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, any realistic strategy of addressing the ongoing planetary ecocide will need to tackle the issue of 'economic' growth – how do we stop it while ensuring well-being and flourishing for all of humanity?

Doing so through minor adjustments within the current capitalist world-system seems improbable, if not impossible (Akbulut, 2021). This has led to the conclusion, popularised amongst others by degrowth scholars, that a radically different economic system is needed.

While the implications concerning *economic* systems coming out of degrowth scholarship are quite clear, this cannot be said for the implications concerning *political* systems. In fact, degrowth scholarship often promotes (minor) adjustments to existing political structures under the label of 'non-reformist reforms' (Petridis et al., 2015). These are considered intermediary steps towards more far-reaching social-ecological transformations. The general prevalence of this approach can be ascertained from the fact that around three-quarters of degrowth proposals consist of top-down policies with a national focus (Cosme et al., 2017).

Recently the (anglophone) academic degrowth literature has started to engage with the question of what kind of state (if any) is required for a degrowth transformation. Much of this engagement has focused on the Gramscian theory of the 'integral state' (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020), which conceptualises the state as comprising both *political* society (army, police, political institutions) and *civil* society (organisations, trade unions, and even families). As Herbert et al. (2021) note, the integral state theory 'subsumes all social activity *within* "the state", and by extension precludes the existence of spaces and relations "outside" the state', thus potentially obfuscating certain strategies and traditions of anti-capitalist resistance. Alternatively, anarchist conceptualisations of the state distinguish between the hierarchical institutions that control the monopoly of violence in modern societies (the state proper), and other institutions and norms that organise social interactions but do not have a claim on the legal use of violence (society at large). Such a distinction allows anarchist thinkers to keep a firm focus on the violent processes by which modern states have been formed, and which continue to be an indispensable condition for their survival (Kropotkin, 1910). Moreover, the anarchist theoretical outlook concludes that the root cause of the

social and ecological crises that we are facing lies precisely in the hierarchical and violent subjugation of certain groups of people by others (Bookchin, 2015). Consequently, addressing these crises and initiating degrowth transformation would require the wholesale dismantling of these violent structures of domination that have become institutionalised over time – in other words, the dismantling of the state (political society) as we know it.

Nonetheless, degrowth scholarship has also stressed the need for any social-ecological transformation to be radically democratically led, and for democracy to be deepened in the process. Direct democracy has long been lauded as part and parcel of the politics of degrowth (Asara et al., 2013; Cattaneo et al., 2012; Deriu, 2012). Others have gone further and claimed that, because of the magnitude of changes that degrowth transformations require, they will necessarily have to be based on anarchistic principles, largely abandoning hierarchical statist structures (Trainer, 2012). More generally, there seems to be broad recognition of the fact that degrowth challenges hierarchical, centralised and representative democracy, and as such it is broadly aligned with (ecological) anarchist thought and ethos (Toro, 2017; D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020).

While the francophone degrowth literature has long acknowledged this alignment, and therefore extensively analysed the question of the state and anarchism in relation to degrowth,<sup>1</sup> the anglophone literature has only recently started recognising the deep links between degrowth and anarchism. For example, Finley (2019) has looked at the connections and discrepancies between degrowth and social ecology (a branch of libertarian socialism closely related to anarchism) and found these two theoretical frameworks to be by-and-large compatible, with the potential for social ecology to fortify the degrowth analysis with its more thorough insistence on non-hierarchical epistemologies. Gerber (2020) demonstrated the fruitfulness of combining degrowth and anarchism when it comes to connecting the ‘growth question’ to peasant movements and the ‘agrarian question’, while Grubačić et al. (2022) reached a similar conclusion

---

<sup>1</sup> For a particularly useful overview of this francophone literature, see D’Alisa & Kallis (2020).

regarding the issue of land (ownership) more generally. Finally, Dunlap (2020) acknowledges the connection between 'degrowth and anti-capitalist, autonomist and (ecological) anarchist movements', and calls for these connections to be strengthened through degrowth intellectuals and advocates recognising the legitimacy of combative struggles against 'growth' (infrastructure) projects. What emerges from these discussions is that the implications regarding future political systems that degrowth scholarship espouses are somewhat ambiguous. While some advocate for 'non-reformist reforms', others argue that the rejection of hierarchical statist structures is a prerequisite for any viable social-ecological transformation. In other words, even though the dominant degrowth position does not generally align with the anarchist rejection of the state, there are deep intellectual linkages between these two anti-capitalist currents, and interest seems to be growing in further exploring and elaborating the connections between them. Following from this logic, we feel that it is necessary for degrowth to engage more explicitly with other anti-capitalist movements, particularly those that are not often comprehensively treated in degrowth scholarship and advocacy. These movements can be broadly categorised as anarchistic because of their rejection of hierarchical structures and their commitment to building alternative (political) institutions capable of supporting socially just and ecologically sustainable communities and societies.

If, as we argue, degrowth implies a complete transformation of political systems (alongside economic ones), then it is of vital importance to start drawing lessons from movements that align with values and goals that degrowth advocates for. These movements are actively enacting alternative political systems on the ground and have been doing so for a long time. In the remainder of this article, we present the processes and outcomes of our efforts to learn from such anti-capitalist movements, while organising a thematic stream at the 8th International Degrowth Conference in The Hague.

## 2. Organising an 'anarchist stream' at the 2021 International Degrowth Conference

Given the pre-eminence of International Degrowth Conferences in forming and promoting the degrowth agenda, as well as in advancing debates and resolving points of contention within the movement (Rilović et al., 2022), we chose one such conference as a strategically important forum for advancing the discussion on the links between degrowth and anarchism. In particular, following Dunlap's (2020) call, we focused on engaging with anti-capitalist movements that can be broadly categorised under the 'anarchist umbrella' (even though some do not necessarily self-identify as such). Our aim was to discover what such movements could teach degrowth scholars and activists with regards to advancing an anti-capitalist agenda that tackles the ongoing capitalist ecocide while simultaneously creating emancipatory social conditions.

As part of the local organising committee of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Degrowth Conference in The Hague (2021), we believed it was fundamental to give a central place to anarchism, both in our organisation processes (practices of autonomy, horizontalism, decentralisation and affinity groups) and in the conference content. This is why we proposed 'Degrowth and Anarchism' as one of the conference's eight thematic streams, the other ones being Decoloniality, Urban-Rural Dialogues, Green New Deals, Feminist Political Ecology, Dutch Social Movements, Cultural Politics and Embodying Degrowth. Having anarchism as a central theme in the conference was intended both as an affirmation and a provocation. First, it is an affirmation in its assertion that degrowth is not only about green new deals, top-down policy measures and institutional reforms, but also about direct action, autonomous movements building concrete (political) alternatives and the material disruption of capitalist destruction. Second, it is a provocation in the sense that it acknowledges real tensions in the degrowth movement between statist and anti-statist positions (see the plenary debate at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Degrowth Conference in Malmö,<sup>2</sup> also see Eversberg &

---

<sup>2</sup> "Plenary – Dialogues between critical social theories, science and degrowth" (2018, August 23). <https://yewtu.be/watch?v=2GBkJVHx6mM>

Schmelzer, 2018) and strives to engage productively with these tensions without compromising on principles, nor neglecting historical disagreements.

During the last week of August 2021, a variety of panel discussions, presentations, movie screenings and debates about degrowth and anarchism took place either online, in one of the decentralised conference venues, or around late-night beers — celebrating the renewed possibility of being able to meet in person after more than a year of pandemic restrictions. More broadly, critiques of the nation-state echoed all throughout the conference's different thematic streams: the nation-state was explained to be a sustained colonial project, a totalising project that cannot be disentangled from capitalism, imperialism and extractivism. Moreover, the nation-state was considered heteropatriarchal and violent in systemic, institutional and very physical ways, while at the same time manifesting the very negation of 'real' democracy. Needless to say, these are all basic premises of anarchism.

### **3. Plenary session on degrowth and anarchism**

There is a lot of talk within the degrowth movement about its purported anarchist roots and influences. Degrowthers refer to the Zapatistas, to Rojava and to other autonomous zones as sources of inspiration and hope. Yet, these examples are often dealt with superficially, and without taking their history and the particularities of their struggles into account. This is exactly what we intended to counteract during the 'Anarchism and Degrowth plenary' on the conference's last day. We were not particularly interested in 'explaining' degrowth's compatibility with anarchism, nor in hypothesising what Bakunin would have thought about the degrowth movement. Instead, we wanted to cherish and foster the diversity of positions that exist in degrowth by bringing in anarchist positions and exploring how they could resonate with existing degrowth practices and with those that could emerge in the future.

Engaging with anarchism, here and now, means enabling concrete discussions about the strategies and lived experiences of organising inside, outside, against

and beyond both the state and capitalism, along with all their contradictions, ambiguities and messiness. For this, we invited four very inspiring persons who organise with and critically reflect on autonomous movements from the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the Kurdish movement in Rojava and beyond, the squatting movement in the Netherlands and the ZAD (Zone to Defend) in Notre-Dames-des-Landes (France). We were very grateful to have Jorge Durán Solórzano, Teun Zwartstaart and Isa Fremeaux join us in person in The Hague, while Dilar Dirik called in from the UK. We asked them what political strategies exist in these places; what their experiences are with autonomous organising in diverse ecologies, institutional settings and historical contexts; and what degrowthers could learn from these diverse movements. In the next section we will summarise the positions and teachings of our invited speakers.

#### **4. A diversity of struggles for autonomy**

**Jorge** shared with us the little-known historical emergence of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). He explained how the transformation of the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (FLN) to EZLN consisted essentially of a metamorphosis from a traditional Marxist-Leninist vanguard guerrilla movement towards an anti-authoritarian military organisation that was not only influenced by, but also comprised of, indigenous peasant communities. In the early 1990s, the EZLN instituted a variety of revolutionary laws,<sup>3</sup> amongst which were the revolutionary women's law, the urban reform law and the law on the rights and obligations of the peoples in struggles. The revolutionary women's law, considered a revolution within the revolution, stipulates that women have 'the right to participate in the revolutionary struggle in the place and to the degree that their will and capacity determine', as well as that women 'may hold leadership positions in the organisation and have military ranks in the revolutionary armed forces'. The urban reform law established the possibility to occupy empty public buildings and recover property, while the law on the rights

---

<sup>3</sup> The complete laws and complementary information can be found in the Zapatista's historical archives, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/category/1993/>

and obligations of the people in struggle established the right of every community to freely and democratically elect local authorities and excluded the revolutionary armed forces from intervening in matters of civil order.

Jorge's intervention showed precious insights in the socio-political context leading to the 1994 Zapatista uprising. The long process of forming an indigenous peasant army showed that Marxist-Leninist vanguardism was neither adequate nor desirable for fostering true social revolution, let alone for establishing and democratically running a territory. Marxist-Leninist vanguardism has proved insufficient in Mexico already since the 1970s, Jorge explained. This highlights the importance of changing political strategies in the light of changing contexts. Similarly, it gives additional historical backing to the assertion that the establishment of new institutions and practices should be part and parcel of any revolution – not something to be implemented 'after the revolution' by a party, an army or a central committee.

**Dilar** explained the workings and ideological positions of the Kurdish transnational movement, and focused on the women's liberation movement. This women's movement lies at the heart of the revolution in Rojava and its international support in the Kurdish diaspora. In her presentation, she drew on the movement's ideological concepts which are mainly articulated by movement leader and political prisoner Abdullah Öcalan. Dilar reminded us that the nation-state is an imposed colonial construct, but that this structure of domination should not merely be considered in the 'short' historical time frame of what we are used to call colonialism. Rather, the movement identifies a 5000-year-old history of state civilisation, beginning with the rise of early Sumerian states and the progressive consolidation and institutionalisation of hierarchical structures. Confronting and overcoming state violence comes with the nourishing of alternative political projects such as self-governance in Kurdistan and the broader Middle East and the transnational confederal organising of the diaspora in Europe, along with broad-based internationalist coalition-building. The Kurdistan freedom movement revolves around women's liberation, radical

democracy and ecology, and aims to recover those aspects of social life that were surrendered to the state, patriarchy and capitalism.

The women's liberation movement emerged in parallel with the progressive dissociation from the nation-state: since the 1990s, women are organising autonomous spaces in order to articulate their own terms of struggle. This is based on the 'women's liberation ideology', which is built on the following principles: (1) women's love for the homeland (not a reactionary nationalism, but care for the land and the territory); (2) 'free thought and free will', i.e. developing own forms and structures of thinking to free the movement from suffocating '-isms';<sup>4</sup> (3) autonomous organising to be less vulnerable to attacks; (4) the importance of struggle and resistance to realise emancipatory visions; and (5) creating own visions of beauty and aesthetics. In parallel, new forms of women's internationalism have emerged that struggle against global patriarchy. Dilar ended her inspiring discourse with a call to degrow our reliance on the state, to grow autonomous communities with capacities for physical and mental self-defence, and to foster women's movements not as an add-on to other struggles, but as an autonomous force of its own within a connected web of emancipatory struggles.

**Teun** shared his lived experiences in the Dutch squatting movement that aims to create and maintain autonomous zones in and beyond the city through the occupation of empty buildings and plots of land. He explained how increased police repression and anti-squatting laws have made squatting more difficult in recent years, with two main consequences: the normalisation of short occupations and the invisibilisation of squatting. When you get evicted every other month, squatting becomes very draining and leaves little room for connections to other political struggles. Similarly, because squatting is pushed outside of the city centre, people don't see it as a possible way of life, which means that the movement does not grow and risks becoming self-centred. These

---

<sup>4</sup> One example of the movement's collective and autonomous radical knowledge production effort is the work around Jineoloji, termed as a 'science of woman and life'. For more information, see [www.jineoloji.org](http://www.jineoloji.org), and for a discussion on the connections between degrowth and jineoloji, see Piccardi and Barca (2022).

two tendencies have created a vicious cycle and a reduced potential for squats and free zones to be spaces and incubators for political action, as they have been historically.

Squats do remain important spaces for degrowthers because of their anti-capitalist ways of organising, their propagation of a DIY-culture, their links to other social movements and the different solidarity initiatives they are part of (such as Solidarity Kitchens). Fundamentally, squats reject and dismantle the very motor of capital accumulation: private property (Kraakdecrisis, 2020). They promote forms of communal living in a highly individualised consumerist society, and other ways of relating to (and taking advantage of) urban infrastructures and the built environment (see also Cattaneo, 2018). For Teun, squatting is about reviving the idea of being proper political subjects, and this idea should be cultivated beyond the sometimes-pragmatic vision of living rent-free. The housing crisis has been getting ever worse in the Netherlands, which has led to the organisation of dozens of housing protests all over the country and a renewed momentum for squatting as well as the assertion of its inherently political nature. Various new squats have sprouted, and the 'squatting info hour' has become a sort of squatting service, helping out new groups to occupy new places, and notably setting up FLINTA\*-squats.<sup>5</sup> In reaction to these new developments and the recent growth of the movement, Teun has seen repression increasing too. He considers this to be an affirmation of the good work the squatting movement has been doing and the fear it has managed to instil into the authorities.

Isa shared with us her personal experience of living at la ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes and their sustained struggle against the construction of a new airport near Nantes. For decades, activists, farmers and residents in the *bocage* in the West of France have resisted not only the construction of this airport, but also rejected 'the world that comes with it'. In the early 2000s, an open letter invited people to squat, inhabit and defend the territory that was threatened by government plans, and it steadily became a huge autonomous zone and source

---

<sup>5</sup> FLINTA\* refers to people who identify as female, lesbian, intersex, non-binary, transgender or a-gender.

of inspiration for activists all over Europe. In 2012, the French government launched a big military operation to evict the squatters and clear the zone but was met with strong resistance and a great diversity of tactics to push back police forces. During this military operation, a 'Reoccupation Demonstration' mobilised 40,000 people to rebuild what had been destroyed during the first days of the operation. Consequently, police withdrew for six years, during which people on the one hand autonomously organised to resist capitalist expansion and state eviction and, on the other, created ways of being and living collectively that are more egalitarian, respectful to the different life-forms living in the zone and rooted in the specific ecologies of the place. Isa moved to the ZAD in 2016 and explained that autonomy is progressively being constructed through diversified agricultural production, collective assemblies, the creation of spaces of resistance and, more generally, the building of commons.

After the government announcement to cancel the airport project in January 2018, a new military operation was launched. This was interpreted by local residents as a punishment for having shown that autonomy is possible. After new evictions and the destruction of various homes, the French government tried to undermine the ZAD's autonomy and commoning projects in more bureaucratic ways, by obliging residents to develop individual projects and sign land-use contracts with the local government. This government strategy has created tension in the movement, and in response a strategy was developed to 'hack' the government's individual forms so as to enable all those who wished to stay to do so. As such, the movement reaffirmed a collective vision that shows the entanglements of all the different activities and life-forms that co-exist in the ZAD. Those collectives or individuals that refused to sign government contracts were once again considered 'illegal squatters'. They were evicted from the zone and their houses were destroyed. While surely the legal status of the ZAD has changed in the last years, Isa enthusiastically explained that it remains a laboratory for autonomously building the commons, and, importantly, that there will never be an airport built there because of the determination and creativity of people in struggle.

## 5. Some lessons learned and perspectives ahead

What we take away from these inspiring discussions is, first, the importance of understanding the particular history and socio-political context in which struggles for autonomy and emancipation emerge and take root. We cannot develop clear understandings of the Zapatista uprising, the Kurdish women's movement, the Dutch squatters, la ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, nor nuanced analyses of their political opportunities, without digging into the historical context, that is, the long history of communities' collective struggle against their specific oppressions. Neither capitalism nor the state are monolithic entities: they differ geographically, evolve over time and differently affect communities and movements around the world. This leads to a variety of political strategies for emancipation that cannot just be transposed or exported from one place to another. No set of predetermined universal policies will guarantee the success of a radical social transformation in a particular territory. What is needed then are more detailed analyses of how state institutions respond to or deal with autonomous political projects, be it in terms of co-optation, repression, counterinsurgency or accommodation – especially when these projects emerge in reaction to allegedly progressive policies such as 'energy transitions' (for an example, see Dunlap, 2020). Only through in-depth engagement with these specific histories, and through a thorough questioning of those state mechanisms that oppress, and those that have the potential to liberate, can we have informed and nuanced dialogues about which movement strategies make sense in a given context.

A second, connected issue that emerged from our discussion is the necessity of resisting violent attempts by the state apparatus (army and police) to repress (newly) liberated territories. At various points in the history of all the cases that we learned about, the state used violent means in order to suppress the building of alternative ways of social and political organisation. We were only able to learn about these movements because they have managed to withstand the violent attacks that threatened their very existence. The reality of the violence that these

movements face, as well as the inevitability and importance of collectively organising to resist such violence, are often glossed over in degrowth scholarship. Transversal to the operation of capitalism are its relentless efforts to destroy community and collective livelihoods that might demonstrate the viability and attractiveness of alternative modes of social organisation. These efforts of destruction are exactly what need to be resisted. The loss of community can be rebuilt with constant reflexivity, self-criticism and truly internationalist connections. Crucially, though, it must also be rebuilt, our speakers agreed, by degrowing our reliance on the state. Not because of ideological dogmas, but because of the historical reality that the state apparatus will almost inevitably use violent means to crush the creation of non-violent and sustainable forms of social organisation that, in practice, question the legitimacy of states.

While much has been written recently on the strategic directions that the degrowth movement should pursue (Barlow et al., 2022), we have yet to see a serious engagement by degrowth proponents with the issue of violence. By this we do not only refer to the prevalence of state violence in physical as well as more subtle ways, but also the inescapable need by emancipatory social movements to resist such violence. If we are to sincerely consider the history, experiences and lived realities of these movements, the question of building, repairing and protecting communities against capitalism and the state should be more central to degrowth scholarship and practice. An obvious example here would be for the degrowth movement to take a clear stance with regards to the abolition of contemporary police services (Jung, 2020).

Thirdly, following from the importance of history, we have the responsibility of building narratives about our respective struggles and their histories. Yet, we should do this without romanticising a past that has allegedly been lost and without silencing the conflicts that have traversed our movements. Narratives are essential memory exercises; they can render visible the history of resistance against domination and as such defend our movements from ideological attacks on our imagination (What is possible? What is desirable?). These narratives, both

personal and collective, are essential for repairing what has been damaged and for building emancipatory futures. During the conference, we have aimed to give space to some of these narratives. Indeed, rather than abstract political analyses of the state and capitalism, we have heard humbling, empathetic and embodied stories by people committed to building futures that are very much in line with degrowth values. These stories speak of territories, relationships, interdependencies and the rebuilding of community. In other words, they speak of ecologies and what it means to be part of a place. We invite degrowth scholars to further explore these place-based and rooted experiences of resistance and prefiguration (following Demaria et al., 2019), while remaining mindful of uncritical celebrations of 'the local' (Mocca, 2020).

Finally, enacting decoloniality within our movements and struggles emerged as a central concern, notably through Jorge and Dilar's focus on the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist nature of autonomous struggles in Chiapas and Kurdistan. We believe this is paramount for autonomous struggles, particularly in Europe from where we write this text. We have witnessed European activist spaces to be traversed with colonial (collective) subjectivities and exclusionary modes of thinking and acting that prioritise some struggles over others (e.g. climate change or, historically, class struggle) without acknowledging the power positions from where this prioritisation is performed. Decolonising our modes of organising and living means recognising that we do not need to decide on one single truth, one vision of the future, one way to achieve transformation, one way to live. As such, it goes hand in hand with permanent struggles for anti-racism and anti-fascism within our different communities and struggles: recognising capitalism's noxious intersections with race, class and gender; dismantling structural racism and institutional violence against minorities; using one's privileges to empower those that have historically been silenced; and building true alliances across difference.

While decoloniality is increasingly discussed in general degrowth debates (Mehta & Harcourt, 2021; Hickel, 2021), this is less the case for intra- and inter-

movement decolonial practice. As such, we see these as two specific arenas where these insights could be further explored. On the topic of degrowth as a (potential) social movement (Burkhart et al., 2020; Demaria et al., 2013; Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2018), further discussions about the political practices that such a movement should adopt are needed. Relying not only on scholarly literature but also on our own experiences within the degrowth 'movement', we wonder about the extent to which it has managed, internally, to challenge hegemonic tendencies and dominant power structures that are so prevalent across society. More concretely, we believe that in order to challenge these tendencies, the degrowth movement should develop more robust and well-defined organisational structures, capable of instituting and maintaining non-hierarchical forms of interaction, as well as finding specific mechanisms to challenge problematic hierarchies. Otherwise, reverting to prevailing social relationships of domination will always be a distinct possibility (Rilović et al., 2022).

Then, at the intersection between degrowth and other social movements (Martínez-Alier, 2012; Roman-Alcalá, 2017; Gerber, 2020; Paulson 2020), we believe that degrowth should devote more of its energy and time to reflexively connect with other existing emancipatory movements that are already challenging capitalist modernity as well as enacting alternatives in practice. In particular, following the examples Rodriguez-Labajos et al. (2019), Nirmal & Rocheleau (2019) and Spanier et al. (under review), it should not shy away from asking uncomfortable questions: why would other movements *actually* care about degrowth? How can degrowth avoid subsuming other movements by 'certifying' them as being 'in line with degrowth values'? How does degrowth avoid hegemonic tendencies, especially given its particular intellectual and geographic origins?

Indeed, taking different dominations and their intersections seriously does not simply mean to proclaim that they are all 'equal' and thus equally important, but to analyse their differences and specificities while simultaneously acknowledging their autonomy and coexistence with other struggles. This necessitates becoming

able to deal in fair ways with the disagreements and power struggles within movements that the tensions between autonomy, coexistence and alliance inevitably make emerge. Accepting intersectional differences means accepting antagonising forces within our movements (e.g. Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019; Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2018). As such, it calls for the creation of a struggle where many struggles fit, while always resisting dogmatism, vanguardism and authoritarianism. Of course this is a careful balancing act, and no blueprint exists for making this work. Yet, some inspiring tracks that emerged during our panel discussion and that we think are worth exploring further include (i) creating cultures of healthy disagreements (i.e. learning to disagree with each other); (ii) ensuring that autonomous spaces and groups can exist and thrive within movements (i.e. deliberate fragmentation); and (iii) building structures for individual and collective healing. These are, again, discussions we would love to spark within the degrowth movement and its emergent network of allies.

## 6. Conclusion

We started our exploration of the interconnections between degrowth and anarchism by recognising a salient, and at times heated, tension in the wider degrowth movement concerning the question of the state. While a diversity of positions exists on how to conceptualise the state and, consequentially, how to engage with it, various scholars point out that degrowth is only compatible with some version of direct democracy. What is more, a non-negligible part of the movement insists that any degrowth transformation will necessarily have to be based on anarchistic principles – prefiguratively building alternative political institutions.

Historical, philosophical and practical affinities between anarchism and degrowth are recognised in degrowth scholarship – even by those authors who generally advocate for more state-led solutions. Nevertheless, these affinities are more often assumed than actually explored in detail. A more serious engagement with anarchism by degrowth scholars and advocates requires a thorough analysis of anarchist theory, historical praxis and contemporary manifestations, and how

each of these adheres to (or diverges from) degrowth values and aims. In particular, we believe a deeper analysis of degrowth strategies and actions that can be enacted outside (the workings) of the nation-state is needed – especially those that go beyond creating isolated and relatively apolitical pockets of alternatives. Since various anti-capitalist movements around the world are putting into practice precisely such strategies and actions, we felt that an appropriate starting point would be to engage with these movements and learn from them what it means to build truly alternative political systems in, against and beyond capitalism and the state.

During the 8<sup>th</sup> International Degrowth Conference in The Hague we aimed to do just that, and we engaged in fruitful dialogue with participants from four autonomous movements that are striving to build socially just and ecologically sustainable communities while resisting the advancement of destructive capitalist forces. We had the pleasure of learning from and with Jorge Durán Solórzano, Dilar Dirik, Teun Zwartstaart and Isa Fremeaux about the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the Kurdish liberation movement in Rojava (and beyond), the Dutch squatting movement and the ZAD in Notre-Dames-des-Landes. Amongst a myriad of insights, we learned about the importance of understanding the history of struggles for autonomy, building collective narratives, resisting violent attempts at repression and enacting decoloniality within and building solidarity between our different movements.

While we consider these learnings important and valuable to the wider degrowth community, we recognise the limits in knowledge creation and dissemination of one thematic stream at a degrowth conference, or of a single article for that matter. Many questions emerged and new avenues remain to be explored. For example, does anarchist theory (of the state) provide a useful framework for degrowth to analyse its own strategic considerations? What can historical anarchist praxis teach us about emancipatory social and ecological struggles? Would a more profound engagement with other movements that can be considered contemporary manifestations of anarchism result in the

empowerment of the degrowth movement itself? What is needed for degrowth to *actually* speak to various movements on the ground working for emancipatory futures? How can confrontational political praxis co-exist with or complement traditional forms of prefigurative politics and policy changes? These are all crucial questions that we have only started to explore. As such, we truly hope that conversations around degrowth and anarchism do not end here. We invite future conference organisers to continue exploring the intersections and possible synergies between degrowth and anarchist theory, historical praxis and contemporary manifestations. We warmly invite local degrowth collectives to discuss anarchist ideas and autonomous practices, and to cultivate revolutionary horizons that are explicitly non-state, non-patriarchal and anti-authoritarian. Anarchism, after all, is not an ideology, but an ethical practice, a permanent social revolution.

*“As far as my purely personal preferences went I would have liked to join the Anarchists.”* (Orwell, 2000 [1938], p. 96)

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the content, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the writing, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to warmly thank Dilar Dirik, Isa Fremeaux, Jorge Durán Solórzano and Teun Zwartstaart for their participation in the plenary session on Degrowth and Anarchism at the 8th International Degrowth Conference, as well as for providing feedback on a draft version of this text. This text would not exist without their invaluable insights and generosity. Thanks to Leonie Guerrero Lara for her comments, and to Julien-François Gerber for creating the conditions for anarchism to have a large presence at the conference, for his continual encouragement and

support, and for helping to make our arguments clearer. Finally, thanks to the journal editors for their advice and feedback.

## References

- Akbulut, B. (2021). Degrowth. *Rethinking Marxism*, 33(1), 98-110.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2020.1847014>
- Asara, V., Profumi, E., & Kallis, G. (2013). Degrowth, democracy and autonomy. *Environmental Values*, 22(2), 217-239. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327113X13581561725239>
- Barlow, N., Regen, L., Cadiou, N., Chertkovskaya, E., Hollweg, M., Plank, C., Schulken, M., & Wolf, V. (Eds.). (2022). *Degrowth & Strategy: How to bring about social-ecological transformation*. MayFly Books.
- Bookchin, M. (2015). *The Next Revolution. Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*. Verso.
- Burkhart, C., Schmelzer, M., & Treu, N. (Eds.). (2020). *Degrowth in Movement(s): Exploring Pathways for Transformation*. Zero Books.
- Cattaneo, C. (2018). How can squatting contribute to degrowth? In A. Nelson & F. Schneider (Eds.), *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities* (pp. 89-102). Routledge.
- Cattaneo, C., D'Alisa, G., & Kallis, G. (2012). Degrowth futures and democracy. *Futures*, 44(6), 515-523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.012>
- Cosme, I., Santos, R., & O'Neill, D.W. (2017). Assessing the degrowth discourse: A review and analysis of academic degrowth policy proposals. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 149, 321-334. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.02.016>
- D'Alisa, G., & Kallis, G. (2020). Degrowth and the State. *Ecological Economics*, 169, 106486. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106486>
- Demaria, F., Kallis, G., & Bakker, K. (2019). Geographies of degrowth: Nowtopias, resurgences and the decolonization of imaginaries and places. *ENE: Nature and Space*, 2(3), 431-450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848619869689>
- Demaria, F., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Martinez-Alier, J. (2013). What is degrowth? From an activist slogan to a social movement. *Environmental Values*, 22(2), 191-215. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327113X13581561725194>
- Deriu, M. (2012). Democracies with a future: Degrowth and the democratic tradition. *Futures*, 44(6), 553-561. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.016>
- Dunlap, A. (2020, December 2). Recognizing the "De" in Degrowth. *Undisciplined Environments*. <https://undisciplinedenvironments.org/2020/12/02/recognizing-the-de-in-degrowth/>
- Dunlap, A. (2020). Bureaucratic land grabbing for infrastructural colonization: Renewable energy, L'Amassada, and resistance in southern France. *Human Geography*, 13(2), 109-126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942778620918041>

- Eversberg, D., & Schmelzer, M. (2018). The degrowth spectrum: Convergence and divergence within a diverse and conflictual alliance. *Environmental Values*, 27(3), 245-267. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327118X15217309300822>
- Finley, E. (2019). Beyond the limits of nature: A social-ecological perspective on degrowth as a political ideology. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 30(2), 244-250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2018.1499122>
- Gerber, J.-F. (2020). Degrowth and critical agrarian studies. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(2), 235-264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1695601>
- Gorz, A. (1968). Strategy for labor. A radical proposal. *Science and Society*, 32(4), 448-450.
- Grubačić, A., Gerber, J.-F., & Rilović, A. (2022). Land in the anarchist tradition. In S.M. Borrás, S.M. & J. Franco (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Land Politics*. Oxford University Press (accepted for publication).
- Herbert, J., Barlow, N., Smessaert, J., & Bardi, C. (2021, September 29). Degrowth strategies: Thinking with and beyond Erik Olin Wright. Degrowth.info. <https://degrowth.info/de/blog/degrowth-strategies-thinking-with-and-beyond-erik-olin-wright>
- Hickel, J. (2021). The anti-colonial politics of degrowth. *Political Geography*, 88, 102404. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102404>
- Jung, E. (2020, September 28). Rethinking Our Relationship to Land: Degrowth, Abolition, and the United States. Degrowth.info. <https://degrowth.info/es/blog/rethinking-our-relationship-to-land-degrowth-abolition-and-the-united-states>
- Kraakdecrisis. (2020, October 22). Squat the crisis! Degrowth.info. <https://degrowth.info/en/blog/squat-the-crisis>
- Kropotkin, P. (1910). Anarchism (Encyclopedia Britannica). *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- Kropotkin, P. (1970). *Kropotkin's revolutionary pamphlets: a collection of writings*. Dover Publications.
- Martínez-Alier, J. (2012). Environmental justice and economic degrowth: An alliance between two movements. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 23(1), 51-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2011.648839>
- Mehta, L., & Harcourt, W. (2021). Beyond limits and scarcity: Feminist and decolonial contributions to degrowth. *Political Geography*, 89, 102411. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102411>
- Mocca, E. (2020). The local dimension in the degrowth literature. A critical discussion. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 25(1), 78-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2019.1696926>
- Nirmal, P., & Rocheleau, D. (2019). Decolonizing degrowth in the post-development convergence: questions, experiences, and proposals from two Indigenous territories. *ENE: Nature and Space*, 2(3), 465-492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618819478>
- Orwell, G. (2000 [1938]). *Homage to Catalonia*. Penguin.

- Paulson, S. (2020). Degrowth and feminisms ally to forge care-full paths beyond pandemic. *Interface: A journal for and about social movements*, 12(1), 232-246.
- Petridis, P., Muraca, B., & Kallis, G. (2015). Degrowth: between a scientific concept and a slogan for a social movement. In J. Martínez-Alier & R. Muradian (Eds.), *Handbook of Ecological Economics* (pp. 176-200). Edward Elgar.
- Piccardi, E.G., & Barca, S. (2022). Jin-jiyan-azadi. Matristic culture and Democratic Confederalism in Rojava. *Sustainability Science*, 17, 1273-1285.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-022-01099-x>
- Rilović, A., Hepp, C., Saey-Volckrick, J., Herbert, J., & Bardi, C. (2022). Degrowth actors and their strategies: toward a Degrowth International. In N. Barlow, L. Regen, N. Cadiou, E. Chertkovskaya, M. Hollweg, C. Plank, M. Schulken, & V. Wolf (Eds.), *Degrowth & Strategy: how to bring about social-ecological transformation*. MayFly Books.
- Rodriguez-Labajos, B., Yáñez, I., Bond, P., Greyl, L., Munguti, S., Ojo, G.U., & Overbeek, W. (2019). Not so natural an alliance? Degrowth and environmental justice movements in the Global South. *Ecological Economics*, 157, 175-184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2018.11.007>
- Roman-Alcalá, A. (2017). Looking to food sovereignty movements for post-growth theory. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, 17(1), 119-145.  
<http://ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/contribution/157-1romanalcala.pdf>
- Spanier, J., Guerrero Lara, L., & Feola, G. (under review). A one-sided love affair? On the potential of a coalition between degrowth and community supported agriculture in Germany. *Agriculture & Human Values*.
- Toro, F. (2017). The thought of Élisée Reclus as a source of inspiration for degrowth ethos. In F. Ferretti, G. Barrera de la Torre, A. Ince, & F. Toro (Eds.), *Historical Geographies of Anarchism* (pp. 88-112). Routledge.
- Trainer, T. (2012). De-growth: Do you realise what it means? *Futures*, 44(6), 590-599.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.020>

## The authors

The AKC Collective was responsible for organising the 'Anarchism and Degrowth' stream at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Degrowth Conference, and is composed of Rebeca Segal <sup>a</sup>, Carol Bardi<sup>b</sup>, Alice Owen<sup>c</sup>, Andro Rilović<sup>d</sup> and Jacob Smessaert<sup>b</sup>. We refuse to hierarchically categorise the different types of work that have gone into the process of organising, reflecting, discussing and writing. In the anarchist spirit of camaraderie, we consider all who were involved in organising the anarchist stream at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Degrowth Conference equal contributors to this article. However, since Andro Rilović and Jacob Smessaert were primarily responsible for writing down this article, they assume responsibility for the views expressed within and any remaining errors.

<sup>a</sup> ASEED Europe

<sup>b</sup> Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University

<sup>c</sup> University of Brighton

<sup>d</sup> International Institute of Social Studies (The Hague) and University of Amsterdam