



BOOK REVIEW

Can degrowth rise to the challenge of confronting corporate power?

A review of *Degrowth & Strategy: How to Bring about Social-Ecological Transformation*

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How to bring about social-ecological transformation, the subtitle to *Degrowth & Strategy* (2022), is a question as ambitious as Lenin's *What is to be done?* (1901). Like the revolutionaries of the 20th century, the editors (Nathan Barlow, Livia Regen, Noémie Cadiou, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Max Hollweg, Christina Plank, Merle Schulken and Verena Wolf) do not shy away from the task at hand: steering society away from the current polycrisis towards social equity and ecological sustainability. Until now, far more attention has been devoted to *what* this transformation would resemble rather than *how* to make it happen. Indeed, degrowth's reluctance to debate the merits of various means to this end has been termed 'strategic indeterminance' (Herbert et al. 2018). *Degrowth & Strategy* provides the first serious attempt to counter this tendency.

In the introduction, the editorial team highlights the need for a multiplicity of strategies to reflect the theoretical diversity of degrowth. It argues that ‘an intentional mix of strategies’ (Schulken et al. 2022, p. 27) should be deliberated democratically and reflect core degrowth values such as autonomy, care, conviviality and equity. The editors intend the book to be more than a compilation of disparate approaches, but rather that the different chapters should complement each other, just as its various strategic proposals all contribute to social-ecological transformation. They defend the need for an analytical consideration of strategy for degrowth. Developed over 18 months following the Degrowth Vienna 2020 Conference: *Strategies for Social-Ecological Transformation*, the book is the culmination of this collaborative effort. It is split into two parts. The first lays the theoretical groundwork on which to build a strategy for degrowth. The second comprises nine chapters focusing on different sectors in turn. Each is coupled with a study showcasing relevant struggles in the following systems: food, urban housing, digital technologies, energy, mobility and transport, care, paid work, money and finance, and trade and decolonisation.

In chapter 2, Chertkovskaya (2022) outlines the ‘strategic canvas’ (p. 58) which forms the thread binding the book together. She bases her framework on the modes of transformation devised by Erik Olin Wright (2019), who argues that three strategic logics exist within anti-capitalist movements: interstitial, symbiotic and ruptural. Interstitial transformations refer to practices that build alternatives to market logic in the spaces unexploited by capitalist hegemony (e.g., healthcare commons). Symbiotic transformations use existing institutions to threaten capital accumulation; one example would be an elected government passing a Job Guarantee. Ruptural transformations seek breaks from existing social structures, in the way that the Bolshevik revolution put an end to the Russian Republic. By using Wright’s work as the foundation for the book, Chertkovskaya positions degrowth squarely within anti-capitalist struggles. Her strategic canvas rehabilitates the ruptural modes of transformation that Wright dismisses in his vision for ‘eroding capitalism’ (2019). She sees direct action, such as strikes and civil disobedience, as following a ruptural logic – albeit in a limited spacial and temporal capacity. This rehabilitation is welcome given what we know about the potential for a smooth transition away from extractivism: Andreas Malm et al. (2021) use the emergence of ‘fossil fascism’ to argue that achieving social-ecological transformation will involve a confrontation with the defenders of the status quo, or it will not happen. Cherkovskaya’s expanded strategic

canvas for degrowth would have benefited from engagement with scholars like Malm, who see ruptures as integral to our collective future.

In chapter 1, Ulrich Brand (2022) condemns what he calls ‘new critical orthodoxy’ (p. 47) for pairing a radical diagnosis with an incremental approach to change. Ironically, this critique was at the forefront of my mind while reading the book: the radical emancipatory social-ecological transformation that he posits is revolutionary, but he introduces a rather vague and incremental strategy. Brand maintains that degrowth ‘is also increasingly offering convincing approaches to strategic thinking and action’ (p. 39). Where is the evidence of these convincing approaches? Many other ecosocialists have been distinctly unconvinced by the strategies existing within degrowth: ‘The degrowth debate so far has lacked a clear vision of what social subjects, and which processes of political subjectivation, can turn its vision into a political strategy’ (Barca 2017). Brand fails to show how degrowth’s strategic indeterminance has been overcome.

The most frustrating feature of the book is that it situates degrowth within anti-capitalist struggle and then focuses so little on countering corporate power. Each sector discussed in Part 2 is treated as if the strategy for transforming one were almost irrelevant to the others. This choice seems hard to justify given what food and monetary systems have in common (i.e., the oligopolistic power structures that dominate them). This reality should not be overlooked, whatever the subsequent suggestions for countering these concentrations of power and catalysing system change. Chapter 13, for example, on digital technologies, focusses most on interstitial strategies. This tendency is understandable: antitrust laws targeting Big Tech do not necessarily qualify as ‘strategies for social-ecological transformation in the field of digital technologies’ (Guenot & Vetter 2022, p. 248). Nonetheless, without them, that transformation may never occur. In the introduction, the editors write that ‘we cannot expect change at the scale required to come from those in power’ (Schulken et al. 2022, p. 32). Why, then, is so little space devoted to taking power away from them?

Chapter 9 turns to the essential question of degrowth’s position vis-à-vis state power. In his discussion of state-civil society relations, Max Koch considers the strategic implications for degrowth arising from the work of Gramsci, Poulantzas and Bourdieu. He argues that

degrowth cannot put forward a strategy targeted at civil society that does not transform the state (or vice versa). This argument is compelling given that degrowth's longstanding aversion to the state is at odds with some of the central planks of its programme, such as Universal Basic Services (Kallis et al. 2020). If a degrowth society cannot be achieved without the use of state power, then degrowth needs a much clearer roadmap for how to seize it. This conclusion pushes degrowth towards party politics, but this question remains unexplored throughout the book. An immediate point of contention is whether the word degrowth itself is well-suited to the political arena (e.g., Raworth & Kallis 2017). This debate remains unresolved but none of the authors weigh in on the topic.

In chapter 14, on energy, Mario Díaz Muñoz's (2022) discusses 'a variety of strategies aimed at transforming energy systems away from fossil fuels and capitalist relations into low-carbon and low-energy use social arrangements' (p. 271). He divides these into three groups: resisting and disrupting energy capital, building alternatives and culturing low-energy use practices. Like other chapters, his approach constitutes more of an overview of current struggles within energy systems without favouring one over the others. As an example, his economic strategies focus on divestment, despite the limited evidence for it as a means of countering fossil capital (Braungardt et al. 2019, Mormann 2020). The author does not call for new strategies within the energy sector, but rather 'highlight[s] the mutually interdependent and interconnected nature of these strategies as the key feature of their potential for being effective' (p. 271). By contrast, Huber (2022) offers a concrete strategy: in his discussion of how to decarbonise the energy sector, he focusses on militant trade unionism in key sectors such as the electrical grid. He does not consider the wider ecological emergency and he dismisses degrowth for comprising 'anti-system radicals'. Nonetheless, his argument merits engagement. While reading Díaz Muñoz's chapter, I found myself lulled into feeling that the strategies we are currently employing could lead to the downfall of fossil capital. So far, there is no evidence supporting this idea.

The most convincing section in Part 2 concerns urban housing. In chapter 12, Gabu Heindl takes a historical perspective to determine the preconditions necessary for social housing to work. Heindl considers the strengths (and limitations) of the housing policies in Red Vienna during the interwar years (1919–1934). She shows how the city's progressive housing

construction tax (*Wohnbausteuer*) limited the growth of socially and ecologically destructive luxury properties. She underlines the importance of decommodifying housing and repurposing existing spaces: 'To use what already exists would possibly be the most effective degrowth strategy with regard to housing' (Heindl 2022, p. 226). Her materialist focus shines a light on the policies that have effectively transformed urban housing in the past. The question for degrowth is how to enact them without the municipal majorities of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria.

Finally, in chapter 19, on the crucial question of trade and decolonisation, Gabriel Trettel Silva (2022) offers little more than a reiteration that degrowth must embrace anti-colonial politics and a vague suggestion that 'degrowthers might find inspiration in anti-imperialist movements in the Global South' (p. 383). What might this internationalist solidarity resemble? It is time to offer something concrete enough to debate. The question of why degrowth scholars are so reticent to put forward such strategic arguments remains paramount.

Taken as a whole, the book shows how atrophied its authors' strategic muscles have become. In the introduction, the editorial team points out how difficult it is to write about strategy but argues that 'cautious engagement [is] better than shying away from the topic due to its challenges' (Schulken et al. 2022, p. 20). Given the stakes of our current situation, this statement represents a staggering understatement. I would have loved to read a contribution from Indigenous land-rights activists, who tend to be clear-eyed about the fact that their lives hang in the balance of their actions. By contrast, most of *Degrowth & Strategy's* authors seem uneasy with the task of writing about praxis. Many prefer instead to use Chertkovskaya's framework to structure a survey of what is already being done, as Christina Plank does in chapter 11: *An overview of strategies for social-ecological transformation in the field of food*. It remains to be seen how useful it is to sort existing struggles into interstitial/symbiotic/ruptural logics.

This volume constitutes a major collaborative achievement by bringing together authors across the field of degrowth, and by positioning strategy at the centre of current debates. The creative commons license through which it was published, and the accompanying website create a needed platform on which to have these debates. Moreover, its aversion to a silver-

bullet approach is laudable: social-ecological transformation will only come to pass through a diversity of struggles, and effective tactics in one context are not necessarily appropriate in another. Nonetheless, constructive debates about what works and what does not are essential to any movement. It is not always clear how far the book goes in resolving these debates as it contains few new proposals with which to disagree. The call by the team of degrowth.info for a *Degrowth International* in chapter 5 is one of the exceptions, and a welcome one: degrowth needs to talk about strategy more. The overriding message of the book – an all-of-the-above approach – does not meet the emergency we face.

At a recent panel event, one of the authors was teased that ‘Goldman Sachs doesn’t care if you raise chickens.’ Her response was that ‘Goldman Sachs doesn’t care if you write texts either.’ Here lies the difficulty for degrowth: so far, we have mostly been raising chickens and writing texts, and we have not gotten serious about fighting the stranglehold that the capitalist class holds over society. If social-ecological transformation is to be more than a dream, that needs to change. Degrowth must devise a more coherent roadmap for countering corporate power, or it risks making itself strategically irrelevant in the revolutions of the 21st century.

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