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Geographies of degrowth

Nowtopias, resurgences and the decolonization of imaginaries and places

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Editorial of the theme issue 'Geographies of degrowth'

Highlights

- Degrowth calls for decolonizing imaginaries and institutions from - in Ursula Le Guin's words - 'a one-way future consisting only of growth'.

- This Special Issue investigates the geographical aspects of degrowth-relevant processes.

- The papers cover indigenous territories in Mexico and India, the streets of Athens, the centres of power in Turkey and the riverbanks of West Sussex.

- Although the degrowth movement emerged in the same decade, and was also spurred by the Limits to Growth debate, it is distinct and cannot be reduced to it.

- This Special Issue proves the potential for geographers to make innovative contributions to the degrowth research agenda.

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Abstract

The term '*décroissance*' (degrowth) signifies a process of political and social transformation that reduces a society's material and energy use while improving the quality of life. Degrowth calls for decolonizing imaginaries and institutions from - in Ursula Le Guin's words - 'a one-way future consisting only of growth'. Recent scholarship has focused on the ecological and social costs of growth, on policies that may secure prosperity without growth, and the study of grassroots alternatives pre-figuring a post-growth future. There has been limited engagement, however, with the geographical aspects of degrowth. This Special Issue addresses this gap, looking at the rooted experiences of peoples and collectives rebelling against, and experimenting with alternatives to, growth-based development. Our contributors approach such resurgent or 'nowtopian' efforts from a decolonial perspective, focusing on how they defend and produce new places, new subjectivities and new state relations. The stories told span from the indigenous territories of the Chiapas in Mexico and the Adivasi in India, to the streets of Athens, the centres of power in Turkey and the riverbanks of West Sussex.

Keywords: limits, growth, nowtopias, transformation, decolonization, space.

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1. Degrowth, a brief history

In September 2018 over 200 hundred scientists wrote an open letter to the European institutions entitled "Europe, It's Time to End the Growth Dependency". Subsequently,

90,000 people signed the letter[1], which summarized core theses of a degrowth community that has formed around a series of biennial international conferences taking place since 2008. Growth and climate mitigation are not compatible, the signatories argued; growth has increasing environmental and social costs, and social and environmental protections are being sacrificed for a growth that is harder and harder to get. Proposals to the European Parliament included worktime reduction, a basic income, resource caps and new well-being indicators.

The history of the concept of degrowth begins 45 years earlier, in France. French intellectual André Gorz first spoke in 1972 of the imperative of capital to grow that is in conflict with the ecological imperative for *décroissance* (degrowth) in material production[2]. French activists and academics took up the concept to criticize what they saw as the a-political environmentalism of 'sustainable development' (Gómez Baggethun and Naredo, 2015). French *décroissance* brought together two intellectual movements (Latouche, 2009): an *à la française* political ecological critique of productivism and economism (Gorz, 1975) and the critique of international development by post-development scholars (Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995). 'Décroissance' featured as the title of a 1979 translation of essays from proto-ecological economist Nicholas Georgescu Roegen (1979). French ecologists and anti-globalization activists used *décroissance* then as a slogan in the 2000s, while a score of books was written on the topic, and a dedicated magazine had tens of thousands of subscribers[3]. The slogan of degrowth spread to activist circles in other Mediterranean countries and, with a series of international conferences and publications starting in 2008, entered the Anglophone academic and activist world.

Adherents of degrowth criticize what they term 'the ideology of economic growth'. Although activists and academics writing about degrowth are often aware of demographers' arguments--which predict that Earth's population will peak at some point between 2050 and 2100 and thereafter decline--their concerns are not primarily demographic in nature. Degrowth proponents are more concerned with what French economist and philosopher Serge Latouche (2009) has called the 'decolonization of the imaginary', dismantling the ideological primacy of growth-based development. The goal is not a better (variously defined

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[1] The letter translated into 20 languages can be found here: https://degrowth.org/2018/09/06/post-growth-open-letter. The petition is available here: https://you.wemove.eu/campaigns/europe-it-s-time-to-end-the-growth-dependency (Accessed 3 April 2019)

[2] M. Bosquet (André Gorz), *Nouvel Observateur*, Paris, 397, 19th June 1972, p. IV. Proceedings from a public debate organized in Paris by the *Club du Nouvel Observateur*.

[3] *La Décroissance: le journal de joie de vivre*. See http://www.ladecroissance.net/ (Accessed 3 April 2019).

as more inclusive or greener) growth, but another kind of society altogether, in which growth and development are not central metrics or signifiers.

From this perspective, growth is not only a material and economic process with social and ecological costs, but also a hegemonic idea that obscures more ecologically friendly and egalitarian alternatives (Kallis, 2018). The term degrowth may suggest an economistic emphasis, but degrowth is meant (rather) to open up the opportunity for dis-embedding life from the totalizing effects of current economic structures and processes. The diagnostic framing (see Della Porta and Diani 2006) of the degrowth movement is multi-faceted (Demaria et al, 2013), attributing disparate social and environmental crises to the discourse and practice of economic growth. The prognosis, with a strong utopian dimension, hypothesizes possible futures and invokes multiple strategies at different scales: oppositional activism, building alternatives, institutional politics, research, dissemination, education and art (Demaria et al, 2013). 'Sharing', 'simplicity', 'conviviality', 'care' and the 'commons' are terms used to describe what these alternative futures might look like (D'Alisa et al, 2014). The vision is one of a society of 'frugal abundance' (Serge Latouche, 2009), 'ecofeminist sufficiency' (Ariel Salleh, 2009) or 'prosperity without growth (Tim Jackson, 2017; Niko Paech, 2012).

Many of the ideas now central to discussions of degrowth were first brewed in activist circles, and later, articulated with bodies of thought by intellectuals such as Latouche (Demaria et al, 2013). Politically, degrowth activism evolved out of the anti-globalization movement, the slogan picking up in France the same year as the Genova protest which marked the peak – and violent crushing - of that movement. Degrowth signalled a homecoming of sorts for those opposed to development, from the Global South to the Global North. Anti-car and anti-advertising activists, cyclist and pedestrian rights campaigners, partisans of agroecology, critics of urban sprawl, and promoters of solar energy and local currencies in France and elsewhere started to see degrowth as a useful concept which articulated what they were fighting for (Demaria et al, 2013).

Degrowth is thus a highly heterogenous, heterodox concept. From an economic perspective, degrowth proponents have focused on issues like cost-shifting and distribution, criticizing (for example) "trickle down" economics, and analyzing the mechanisms via which growth produces inequality (Hickel, 2017). Inspired by the 'anti-utilitarian' critique of the utility-maximisation logic of conventional economic theory (see Caillé 1989; Mauss, 2007 [1924]), degrowth theorists have also explored the distinction (and indeed disjuncture) between wellbeing, happiness, and economic growth (e.g. Easterlin 1974; Helliwell et al.,

2012; Kasser, 2017). Growth is criticized not only for its social and ecological consequences, but for its senselessness –a mad pursuit of money after more money. In contrast, when many environmental activists invoke degrowth, they have in mind the value of ecosystems beyond monetary evaluation and resource limits, rights of nature, or the entropic nature of the economic process (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Odum, 2001). Anti-globalization activists within the degrowth movement mobilize instead scholar work that critiques the Westernization of cultures, such as the post-development critique of western development as a political project reproducing colonial relations (Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995; Latouche, 2009). Back-to-the-landers (or "voluntary simplifiers") articulate degrowth in terms of voluntary simplicity (Thoreau, 1854; Kumarappa, 1945), Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973), or Illich's conviviality (1973). More recently there have been attempts to connect degrowth to the *Indignados/Occupy* wave of protests (Deriu, 2012; Cattaneo et al. 2012; Asara and Kallis, 2018; Asara et al., 2013).

2. From Limits to Growth to Degrowth

The objective of this special issue (and this editorial) is not to define limits to growth or blueprints for degrowth, but rather to analyze how geographers may contribute to the study and understanding of innovative social processes that emerge as growth trajectories slow down or even collapse. We did not ask contributors to this special issue to specify the future of degrowth processes. Rather, we encouraged contributions that explore how what David Harvey called the madness of economic reason - the expectation of compound growth – and its collapses play out in different geographical settings, analyzing the social processes of transformation that are arising in response. The papers we review have little to say about how societies can collectively define limits or how they may organize for degrowth, but much to say about collective responses in the context of economic stagnation or contraction. These responses are highly variegated, and it is important to be attentive to the range of implications, particularly for vulnerable communities.

In order to provide context for this discussion, this section provides an overview of the Limits to Growth debate versus edgrowth. This is relevant, as the term degrowth might raise questions about a covert Malthusianism, or be confused with Limits to Growth. Ever since Harvey's (1974) critique of the Limits to Growth argument, critical geographers have

been skeptical of scarcity-oriented, neo-Malthusian claims about planetary overshoot. Harvey's critique emerged in response to the 1972 *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows et al, 1972). Concerns about rapid population growth, increasing pollution and the rise in oil prices set the context for the Report's dynamic system models, which illustrated how compound growth of population and production tends to infinity and cannot be sustained in a finite planet with limited resources. Although the degrowth movement emerged in the same decade, and was also spurred by the Limits to Growth debate, it is distinct.

First, while the Limits to Growth debate largely only ecological limits, degrowth debates express wider concerns with democracy, justice, development and/or Westernization. Second, the understanding of limits is subtly different. The Limits to Growth argument implies a naturalness of limits: an external and natural scarcity to which society should adapt, or risk crash. The degrowth literature—influenced as it was by French, post-Marxist political ecologies—instead emphasizes the social construction of limits. From the degrowth perspective, limits are a locus of struggle in the pursuit of a post-capitalist world (Kallis, 2019; Kallis and March, 2015).

Political differences are also telling. The Limits to Growth report was sponsored by the Club of Rome, which was founded by Aurelio Peccei (an Italian industrialist and philanthropist) and Alexander King (a scientist, then Director General for Scientific Affairs for the OECD). The Report dealt with 'the problèmatique': a cluster of intertwined problems that concerned global elites at the time. Degrowth, in contrast, emerged largely via grassroots activists critical of globalization and capitalism, who lived and advocated simpler living. André Gorz first talked for example about degrowth in a 1972 public debate organized by the *Club du Nouvel Observateur* to discuss the Limits to Growth report, but his question was whether degrowth "is compatible with the survival of the (capitalist) system."[4] The concerns of Peccei and King, one imagines, were instead how to save the capitalist system from self-destruction.

In Limits to Growth, the message is that we should limit ourselves before nature limits us. In the degrowth literature, in contrast, the emphasis is on the desire for socially and ecologically just limits (Kallis, 2019). Cornelious Castoriadis (1998 [1975]), Ivan Illich (1973) and André Gorz (1982) all advocated such "self-limitation". For Castoriadis (1998 [1975]), autonomy is defined as the ability of a collective to decide its future and its limits in common, freed from external ('heteronomous') imperatives and givens, such as the law of

[4] M. Bosquet (André Gorz), *Nouvel Observateur*, Paris, 397, 19th June 1972, p. IV. Proceedings from a public debate organized in Paris by the Club du Nouvel Observateur.

God (religion), or the laws of the market (economics). Illich (1973) wanted autonomy from large techno-infrastructures and the bureaucracies that manage them. Limits were something to fight for: a struggle, for example, to keep education or health systems at a human scale. Gorz, like Castoriadis, supported the ecological movement precisely because it questioned the heteronomous forces of industrialism and growth, defending "the right [of people] to choose how they want to live together, to produce, to consume" (Gorz, 2006). In a 1992 article for the New Left Review entitled 'Political ecology: Expertocracy versus self-limitation', Gorz criticized the idea that limits are something out there that is to be determined by experts, a posture he characterized as anti-democratic. For Gorz, "self-limitation, governance of the metabolism with nature and regaining control over production are intrinsically linked." (Gollain, 2016:129).

On this point, the degrowth perspective is aligned with long-standing debates within the discipline of geography. Human geographers have also criticized discourses of Malthusian eco-scarcity (Harvey, 1974; Mehta, 2013). Marxian geographers speak of limits not to growth, but rather of contradictions embedded within capitalism (Harvey, 2014). Indeed, Harvey (2014) notes that the requirement of capital for compound growth is its most lethal contradiction, a 'madness of economic reason', a term introduced by Gorz, whom Harvey also interestingly mobilizes to think about de-alienated labour beyond capitalism. Geographers like Harvey understand capital to be creative as well as destructive, as it can be deployed to shift costs, make profits out of disasters, and constantly find new outlets, while producing new limits. For example, McCarthy (2015) argues that a shift to renewable energies can renew capital accumulation. Degrowth theorists agree, but temper their analysis through reference to ecological economics, which indicates that lower energy returns on energy investment of renewable energy will reduce labour productivity (Sers and Victor, 2018). Capital's ability to profit from ecological limits then cannot be taken for granted. In relation, the degrowth argument is not so much that there are limits to growth, but that there is a need for a political struggle to limit growth and capital because they have disastrous consequences (Kallis, 2018; 2019).

The degrowth literature has not provided yet definite answers to questions about the governance of limits, power relations, vulnerability, and decision-making in the definition and enforcement of limits, especially in contexts of poverty or the global South. Indeed, the literature tends at times to a one-sided, positive view. The thorny distributive questions (who gets to decide new limits, whose voice is going to be heard in those processes, who will suffer, and how will that suffering be justified) have not yet been the focus of extensive

concrete analysis. Rather, degrowth proponents tend to develop their arguments based on ecological economics, or political philosophy targetting the myth of limitless growth (cleaner, greener, or more inclusive). For example, degrowth proponents explore the hypothesis that under certain conditions, the setting of limits can be part and parcel of democracy rather than an authoritarian imposition (Kallis, 2018). While dagrowth scholars are cognizant of the fact that living within limits is a right that those most vulnerable do not currently have, they tend to develop their proposed responses at the level of theoretical discourse, rather than concrete empirical experiences and case studies.

3. Current geographical research on degrowth

Since 2008, when the term degrowth entered the English lexicon, there have been over 400 peer-reviewed articles with the keyword degrowth (and many more referring to it), increasing from a few in 2008 to over 100 in 2018. Weiss and Cattaneo (2017) review 91 peer-reviewed articles with the word 'degrowth' in their title and find that most are conceptual essays with normative claims, though more recently there is turn towards modeling studies, and empirical assessments of lived experiences or relevant policies. Kallis et al (2018) review the broader literature relevant to degrowth debates, including research on the origins of the idea of growth and the construction of its hegemony (e.g. Purdey, 2010; Dale, 2012, Schmelzer, 2016); qualitative and quantitative studies on the limits of green growth, especially on the question of 'decoupling' (e.g. Krausmann et al., 2009; Wiedmann et al, 2015; Murphy and Hall, 2011; Jorgenson and Clark 2012); ecological macro-economic models and studies of viable zero growth scenarios (e.g. Kallis et al., 2012; Victor, 2008; Jackson, 2017, Hardt and O'Neill, 2017, Lange, 2018); anthropological studies of communities that voluntarily or involuntary live without growth - from Cuba in the special period (Borowy, 2013), to intentional eco-communities, economically depressed or depopulating cities, and hunter-gatherer societies or pre-capitalist civilizations (e.g. Suzman, 2017, Lewis, 2017, Guttman-Bond, 2010, Verma, 2017); studies of appropriate technologies pre-figuring degrowth alternatives to ecomodernism (e.g. Alexander and Yacoumis, 2018; Kostakis et al, 2019, and various contributions in Kerschner et al, 2018); and speculations about the future of liberal democracies after the end of growth (e.g. Muraca, 2013, Asara et al, 2015, various contributions in Cattaneo et al, 2012).

Recent academic contributions to the degrowth research agenda include the EUROGREEN model[5], an advanced dynamic systems model with ecological, social and financial variables that assesses policy mix options (including work-time reduction, basic income and a job guarantee) (D'Alessandro et al., 2018). An edited volume in Ecological Economics explores relations and alliances between degrowth and environmental justice mobilizations -such as those mapped in the Environmental Justice Atlas-[6] (Akbulut et al, 2019; see also Martínez-Alier, 2012), including problems with relating the degrowth discourse to non-Western contexts (Rodriguez-Labajos, 2019, Muradian, 2019). Demaria and Kothari (2017) position degrowth as a keyword among many in a 'pluriverse' of alternatives to development (for an inventory of alternatives to development, see Kothari et al 2019). Gerber and Raina (2018) in their edited *Post-growth Thinking in India* link the western discourse of 'prosperity without growth' to grassroots Indian alternatives. Paulson (2017) in an edited volume for the Journal of Political Ecology based on sessions at the annual meeting of the American Association of Anthropologists presents a range of rooted ethnographic analyzes of lived experiences of managing without growth.

The lack of engagement by geographers with degrowth is somewhat striking. The few contributions include a study by Kallis and March (2015) on the utopian spatial elements of degrowth, drawing from Ursula Le Guin's science fiction in dialogue with empirical insights from cooperatives in the city of Barcelona. Schindler (2016) looks at the political coalitions forming around Detroit's regeneration after bankruptcy, what he calls a 'degrowth machine politics', city actors adapting policies and investments creatively to a future without foreseeable growth. Jarvis (2017) reflects on intentional experiments, such as eco-communities and co-housing from a degrowth perspective, distinguishing them from the commercial sharing economy.

Despite the dearth of publications by academic geographers referring to the term degrowth, obvious links exist between degrowth and phenomena studied by geographers, such as shrinking cities and regions, or community economies in the Gibson-Graham (1996) tradition. However, to date these interconnections have not been systematically explored. Schulz and Bailey (2014) are the only ones to our knowledge that have formulated an agenda

[5] All the details about the EUROGREEN model can be found here, where one can also built her/his own scenarios by choosing policies and simulation parameters: https://forio.com/app/simone_dalessandro/eurogreen/index.html#introduction.html (Accessed 3 April 2019)

[6] The Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) is a global inventory of environmental conflicts with almost 3000 reported cases (See Temper et al, 2018; Scheidel et al, 2018). See https://ejatlas.org/ (Accessed 3 April 2019).

for research on degrowth for economic geographers, proposing research on: 'new spatial patterns of production and consumption induced by rising energy and resource costs'; 'regional and local "transition" strategies for moving towards decentralized sufficiency, the decommercialization of goods and services, and social enterprises and "solidarity economies"'; 'trends in the adoption of more environmentally friendly and resource efficient modes of designing, producing and using manufactured goods, including trends towards shared-use concepts'; and 'the development of ethical or sustainable investment products by the financial sector, including the financialization of renewable energy and development policies (e.g. microfinance investments) in the global South'.

In the five years since the publication of Schulz's and Bailey's essay, geographers engaged with some of these questions. Several geographers for example have critically assessed the notion of green economy, but without necessarily addressing degrowth issues (e.g. Bina, 2013; Gibbs and O'Neill, 2014; O'Neill and Gibbs, 2016; North, 2015; Barr, 2016). Caprotti and Bailey (2014) explore degrowth concepts in the context of the green economy. Nicolosi and Feolia (2016) apply these ideas to the Transition Movement (which is a network of grassroots community initiatives that seek to build resilience in the face of challenges such as peak oil, climate change, and economic crisis). In a recent article in *Progress in Human Geography*, Krueger, Schulz and Gibbs (2018) draw on degrowth concepts to explore the institutionalization of diverse economic spaces. Lange and Bürkner (2018) examine open workshops (such as maker spaces and Fab Labs) as loci for flexible value creation, aligned with goals articulated by degrowth proponents. Smith and Reid (2017) discuss different notions of happiness and the search for wellbeing beyond growth from a geographers' perspective, whereas Schmid (2018) looks at post-growth organizations and how they are situated within growth-driven economies. These are useful and important contributions. However, there have been no attempts within geography to systematically theorize these topics in relation to degrowth.

4. Geographies of degrowth

When we issued the call for papers for this Special Issue, we wanted to probe what geographers interested on degrowth are actually working on. In our call for papers, we referred to the geographical aspects of degrowth-relevant processes. We were interested in how are degrowth ideas socially produced, performed, and organized spatially at different

scales, what sorts of places and territories these ideas produce, and how new spatial subjectivities may be constructed. We also invited contributions on the role of the state in supporting (or blocking) degrowth-oriented transformations and encouraged attempts to apply concepts mobilized by critical geographers (e.g. the production of space and nature, theories of commodification and planetary urbanization, theories of regulation and the state) to the degrowth question.

This Special Issue presents a selection of five of the best works that we received. In one sense, the themes our contributors covered were surprising. Rather than the engagement with the issues that Schulz and Bailey (2014) called for (e.g. transition towns, sharing economy, renewable energy experiments) we received a more radical set of abstracts, in which words such as 'insurgence' and 'resurgence', 'decolonization' and 'nowtopia' featured frequently. Geographies studied by our contributors ranged from Chiapas and the Kurds, to the Adivasi in southern India, occupied spaces in Athens, and the riverbanks of West Sussex. We selected these different landscapes, histories and people for their geographical diversity, but also for their peculiar commonalities across the 'North'/'South' divide. In all cases new types of common territories and institutions are produced through struggle in and through a situation of disaster. These are not smooth 'transition town' or 'slow city' initiatives – they are sites where the economy has subsided, the state has retreated, and capitalism intensifies its enclosures. Degrowth, the contributors postulate, is an process of conflict with the prevalent model of growth-based development - not a blueprint to be discovered but rather a process that emerges as a model of growth encounters its limits and people challenge the consequences. Crisis, we should emphasize, has terrible social and ecological impacts that are not to be celebrated; rather, these articles share a commitment to analyzing how change takes place in and through moments of crisis, albeit in contradictory ways. The diversity of our cases is a strength in this respect, as it allows us to see the situated and context-specific territorial struggles taking place in very different places, from the hinterlands of India and Mexico to the streets of Athens and the riverbanks of Sussex. This diversity allows us to reflect on the differentiated and variegated forms that challenges to– and the alternatives to – growth-based development may take.

Nowtopian territories

'Nowtopias' (Carlsson and Manning, 2010) refers to territorial processes of regeneration that involve non-wage labour and are motivated by a desire to produce an

alternative future, today. Geary presents her study of the spontaneous activism of retirees in West Sussex (working for the protection and reclamation of a river bank) as a peculiar case of nowtopianism, given its differences from the cases of pirate programmers, guerilla urban gardeners or bicycle workshops, presented as exemplars of nowtopias by Carlsson and Manning.

Geary focuses on the lived experience that forms new communities and senses of place at a different tempo, that of those who construct 'a different life after working life is completed'. As Geary explores, the riverbank is a place of the imagination for the activist pensioners, where they re-assert agency and demand recognition in older age, leaving their mark in a temporal 'common being-with the earth'. Banding together to clear the drains of leaves, attending and petitioning at parish council meetings, or fundraising for and commissioning engineers' reports, elder nowtopians challenge the notion that their local environment has to adapt to exogenous forces, geophysical or political.

The retirees of West Sussex respond to two types of crisis, Geary argues: a personal one, with the end of their professional life and the need to find new roles for themselves; and a social one, with dramatic cuts in public services in a context of intensifying flood events. Living under 'austerity localism', she observes, 'many of these elders have undergone a personal, if not political, epiphany and have turned to forms of environmental activism to articulate their agency and demonstrate solidarity'. As Varvaroussis (this issue) notes in the very different context of austerity-hit Greece, where people banded together and got politicized as economic infrastructures nearly collapsed, the absence of the state in the flooded riverbanks of West Sussex awakened people to austerity politics. Funding cuts 'generated a local gerontocracy in charge of organising the community and managing allocated funds from local government … a front line in an environmental battle between the enclosure of the civil commons as state authorities and agents neglect their duties to maintain flood defences, and the potential to rebuild these same commons through the life goods associated with community-based solutions'.

Geary wants us to pay more attention to 'nowtopian actions with low visibility from a degrowth perspective'. For the activist retirees, 'work, once removed from its monetary tethers, can be a source of delight and more … a productive, life affirming activity'. Geary disagrees with Carlsson and Manning's emphasis on young, precarious, often digitally enabled, nowtopians. Focusing only on archetypical agents of counterculture we miss the 'plethora of ordinary, pedestrian, unrecognized nowtopian practices burgeoning in unrecognized corners … pragmatic responses to generating environmentally sensitive ways

of being which exist in the everyday'. The reproductive economy of care that degrowth scholars have emphasised is 'far more ubiquitous than the existing degrowth literature might first indicate or seek to allow', Geary concludes.

Geary is skeptical nonetheless of how far the concept or experiences of English nowtopians can be extended to other geographies. 'Nowtopianism doesn't sit comfortably with people living in poverty with few if any choices facing them', she recognizes. This echoes a critique against the extant degrowth literature that while Eurocentric, it claims a universal theoretical applicability similar to that of the economistic discourses of growth and development that it confronts. Nirmal and Rocheleau (this issue) dislike 'the continuing dominance of western/northern economic and political theory at the intellectual heart' of the degrowth academic movement and point to the limits of 'its focus on economistic categories and measures, and its apparent acceptance of the continuing primacy of economics and politics in the capitalist-colonial one-world-world'. We should not assume the sharedness of anything, they argue: 'while the degrowth imaginary often abstracts and universalizes, living worlds are webbed together'.

This raises important questions about what degrowth may not be able to achieve given where it is rooted historically, politically and socially. Rodriguez-Labajos et al (2019) for example, report how Indigenous and environmental justice activists in Latin America do not feel affinity to the word degrowth, seeing it as one more intellectual term arriving to them from Europe, insufficiently sensitive to their realities and unable to capture the essence of the visions articulated by those who oppose extractivist projects and promote alternative life-worlds. Muradian (2019) criticizes the degrowth movement for 'reflecting the values of a particular social group, namely the well-educated European middle class that share progressive-green-cosmopolitan values'. This feature, he opines, 'creates significant barriers for its dissemination among lower-income social groups in other parts of the world'. For Muradian there is an important difference between frugality as a choice and frugality as a social condition.

In the degrowth literature, there has been considerable uneasiness with how to relate the term to the concerns of the Global South. One line of argument, among ecological economists at least, was that degrowth makes sense only for the overdeveloped, high GDP countries of the Global North, degrowth in the North leaving ecological space for the South to grow and develop. Escobar (2015) argues that this position is unsatisfactory, since it turns the question into an economistic, accounting one (more growth here, less growth there), ignoring critiques to development articulated in the Global South, and alternative and/or

Indigenous projects producing territories of difference. The North versus South dichotomy is counterproductive insofar as it glosses over the fact that a substantial part of the elites and the growing middle classes in the South live a Western, growth-oriented mode of living. More importantly, it underplays linkages between wealth and poverty. Poverty and underdevelopment are not growth waiting to happen, but the ugly sides of growth and 'development'. Rather than asking then *who* should grow and who should degrow, a more instructive question would be *how* growth produces poverty, how people challenge on the ground destructive and extractive processes of growth, and what tentative alternatives do they create along the way. Degrowth in this sense, is not a material process of lowering consumption, an irrelevant demand for those who live within conditions of poverty, but a sustained critique or resistance – intellectual and practical - to growth and its consequences. The ideology of growth disguises continued colonial relations with a pretense of generalized betterment, while securing the unequal exchanges and the access by capital to cheap raw materials and human labour that is necessary for sustaining growth for some at the expense of others.

Insurgent territories

In this spirit, Nirmal and Rocheleau develop a 'decolonial' perspective on degrowth: an intersectional and situated approach to degrowth that is 'materially and ecologically rooted and culturally expanded ... from a communal, relational and pluriversal standpoint'. This decolonial degrowth is 'a profoundly material strategy of recovery, renewal, and resistance (resurgence) through practices of re-rooting and re-commoning', practices that they, like Geary (this issue) call 're-growth' - regeneration against, or in the absence, of capitalist growth. The challenge for them is how to 'regrow localized interdependent networks, and degrow colonial, dependent global networks'. 'A networked, engaged decolonial degrowth could recover practices of conviviality and communality/comunalidad', Nirmal and Rocheleau argue, 'through practices that create more circulation and less one-way flows, while they re-scale and re-integrate production, care work and commerce'. To illustrate this they share their ethnographic experiences from two 'self-organized movements for the resurgence of Indigenous life and territory'- movements that are 'building economies and ecologies of resurgence and simultaneous resistance to growth by deterritorialization … and imagine what does not yet exist'.

The Zapatistas, Nirmal and Rocheleau show, reconstituted their lives not by growing the amount of land under cultivation, but by restoring ranches and plantations to produce food. Those who reworked the land slowly brought their own consumption to levels of sufficiency, while growing solidarity networks with cooperatives and collectives in urban centres. The Zapatista resistance to growth is focused not on local consumption but on opposing externally conceived and managed, growth-driven projects, putting their bodies against public entities, corporations and nacro-capitalists and the megaprojects they bring or follow. Crucially, the effort of the Zapatistas to degrow capitalism involves a principled and practical pursuit of gender equality with constant rethinking of governance and gender labour exchanges. Degrowth does not need to mean austerity or isolation, they argue, reporting on the cultural practices of the Zapatista that expend surplus.

Like in Chiapas, degrowth in consumption or waste bears no relevance in Attappady in south India either. But Nirmal and Rocheleau find several groups of Adivasis, activists, and allies 'engaged in a convergent, degrowth movement of their own'. Their movement is 'decolonial ... in that it is aimed at the same nexus of capitalism, colonialism, and their lovechild development'. 'Food sovereignty', a structuring term for resurgent Adivasis 'imagines a post-development world that carries many of the ecological and economic principles of degrowth', including restoring indigenous food systems and bodily and ecological health. Like the Zapatistas, the Adivasis fight against state-supported growth and development projects of extraction and the danger of expulsion by rural settlers and agriculturalists, or real-estate developers. The Adivasi want to degrow the scale of commercial cultivation, to regrow instead an ecologically, and territorially viable future for their community. This rests on access and control over appropriate lands, seeds, and other necessities, re-commoning lands previously enclosed by the state and private actors and regaining control over use and access to ancestral forestlands, establishing self-governance in the region. Here one finds again the close connection between degrowth, reclaiming the commons, and a notion of radical abundance (Hickel, 2017). Not only are the commons defended against growth, but also access to the commons is necessary for sufficiency within limits.

The Zapatista and Attappady examples, Nirmal and Rocheleau conclude 'offer ways to imagine future worlds and build conditional autonomy while simultaneously living alongside and resisting the depredations of neoliberal capitalism'. Their study shifts focus 'on resurgence, as a collective response to the extractive politics of capitalist colonialism, built on relational territories and the relationality of territory'. The study shows that resistance against

the forces that promote growth and creation of territories of difference contesting a one-way future consisting of growth, are far from a mere intellectual concern of a green-cosmopolitan group in Europe (see Muradian, 2019). The concept of degrowth may make sense from a Southern perspective, not as an umbrella term that will encompass the variety of alternatives practiced there, but as an attempt to deconstruct and undo in the West a Western imaginary that has been at the heart of colonialism and that domestic elites use in the Global South to justify inequalities and eradicate more egalitarian alternatives.

Liminal territories

Decolonization and insurgence are recurrent topics in Varvaroussis's (this issue) study too of new solidarity commons in austerity and depression-hit Greece, interestingly a very different geographical setting than that of the Chiapas or south India. Varvaroussis wants to put more flesh in the appealing, but vague slogan of Serge Latouche of degrowth an an effort to 'to decolonize the imaginary'. Decolonization should not be used as a metaphor, Varvaroussis warns, but reminds that for Latouche the decolonization of the imaginary from growth and development was not a metaphor, since for him development was 'a concrete continuation of the colonial project'. Varvaroussis notes how indebted Greece during the "memorandum years" of austerity was subjected to processes of neocolonial domination, rife with reproduction of dualisms characteristic of colonial thinking, such as those of superiority-inferiority or hard-working Northerners versus lazy Southernerns.

Degrowth is not negative GDP growth and Greece's crisis is not a case of degrowth, Varvaroussis recognizes, but if a transition akin to degrowth is to take place in capitalist societies, it will likely start with a crisis, since the capitalist system dysfunctions without growth. How are then prevalent capitalist imaginaries unsettled in times of crisis? This is a question as important in Greece as it is in West Sussex or the Chiapas. The imaginary, Varvaroussis explains after Castoriadis, 'is the shared collective imagination distilled in specific institutions, which operates as the "glue" that holds a society together by being a representation of it.' The decolonization of the imaginary is 'not a gradual and smooth process, enabled through a moral demand for a different future, but a process enabled through and because of crises and the stage of suspension they usher in'. Crises are important because they 'open up a stage of suspension—a liminal stage—in which the rise of new social practices can facilitate the emergence of new social imaginary significations and institutions'.

A liminal stage is perhaps what the elder activists of West Sussex (Geary, this issue) found themselves also in – searching for a new personal identity as they exited the world of work and seeing, like the Greeks, austerity dismantling the public infrastructures they had learned to depend upon. Such moments of crisis and transition are also moments of renewal, Varvaroussis claims, retelling the story of rupture in Greek society after the December 2008 urban insurgence. Varvaroussis' analysis documents and explores how dominant capitalist imaginaries are unsettled in times of crisis. In this case, protesters burned the Christmas tree in the commercial centre of Athens, destroyed banks and stores in the posh quarters of the city center, while young, unemployed artists occupied the National Opera protesting against the commercialization of art, while launching impromptu, free street art interventions from the Opera. These destructive and constructive actions, Varvaroussis argues, symbolised an attack against the prevalent imaginary of consumerist opulence, an illuminating claim given that an attack against commercialized consumption is not what one would expect in the onset of an economic crisis. After the eruption, and amidst the austerity that dismantled livelihoods, Varvaroussis describes a period of suspension and mass de-identification vividly visualized in banners in protests claiming "we do not know where we are going but we won't go back" or "we are nobody". Some channelled their search for meaning into new solidarity projects – from time banks and social clinics, to food banks and urban gardens. New social imaginary significations – around the tripartite concepts of commons, degrowth, and solidarity – were embodied in the institutions that governed these projects. Crisis, Varvaroussis concludes, 'opens up a plateau where the tensions of "what has been lost" meet the aspirations of "what can be next." And what happens next depends not only on the ideas, but also the practices available at the time.

Varvaroussis warns against a facile reading of his argument as a celebration of poverty or austerity as catalysts of solidarity. He, as most Greeks, is well aware of the pain and suffering experienced in the austerity period, the injustices committed and left unpunished, or the rise of xenophobic and fascist politics. Disorentiation, he recognizes, does not necessarily lead to a progressive future – but is an opening, nonetheless, and an inevitable one, unless we want to remain stuck to a future of capitalist growth, for fear of instability. Nonetheless, the Greek experience, Varvaroussis concedes, reveals also that 'there is no social mechanism to ensure that crisis will always lead to the decolonization of the shaken social imaginary' nor that the new imaginary will come 'close to being regarded as a credible alternative to the dominant one'. Here he hints to the retreat and co-optation of Greece's insurgent movement after the rise of radical left-wing party Syriza in government. After a

period of resistance to EU institutions, the government capitulated and continued policies of austerity.

The State and (de)growth

The state is evident in the papers in this special issue both through its absence and retreat, as well as its forceful intervention to implement austerity or growth-oriented projects. This view of the state, however, as a discernable entity, a mega-machine of a sort is unsatisfactory: we fall into a false dichotomy 'for or against' the state, when we should be asking 'what kind of state', exploring what functions a state plays, and how to transition to a different state configuration, self-governing or else (D'Alisa, forthcoming). Akbulut (this issue) follows a Gramscian theory of the state, whereby ruling society secures its interests in the sphere of civil society where consensus is generated. A variety of material and ideological practices make ruling appear impartial and justify the claim of rulers to rule, securing the active consent of the society.

From this perspective, Akbulut argues that for the modern nation-state growth is much more than an economic necessity. Growth functions, she explains, 'as a (connected) political project as it allows the ruling class to portray itself as a neutral actor', fully differentiated (as 'the state') from the society, charged with the pursuit of the general interest of the society. Growth is a key word for creating the illusion of a collective interest, in the name of which 'the state' is legitimated. It justifies the claim to rule and 'it serves to unite the internally fragmented sphere of the social and brush aside (class-based) distributional conflicts', while enabling 'the distribution of material concessions to subordinate classes without threatening the status of upper classes'. The hegemony of growth then stems 'less from the short-term needs of capital accumulation and more from those of the reproduction of state hegemony'.

She illustrates this with historical material from Turkey. Even though the goal of modernization via economic growth is not unique to Turkey 'the extent of its undisputedness [in Turkey] is noteworthy'. Right and left parties differed on how they wanted to achieve growth, but never whether. This 'urgency to achieve economic development', Akbulut clarifies 'was constituted as the collective interest of the society, through which the Turkish state could gain legitimacy for its claim to rule. That is to say, the Turkish state's motive in pursuing the growth imperative is not merely realizing economic development, but also legitimizing its claim to rule'. Akbulut talks of 'The king of dams', Suleyman Demirel, who

served as the prime minister multiple times between 1965 and 1980 and who famously claimed that '[t]he Republic is cement, roof tiles, the factory, the road, the dam; it is development [and] welfare'. The main slogan for Tayyip Erdogan´s Justice and Development Party's in the 2011 electoral campaign was 'Let Stability Last, Let Turkey Grow' – not only telling in the direct reference it makes to economic growth, Akbulut argues, 'but also in the explicit links it draws between growth and stability (of political rule)'. No surprise then that questioning growth is considered an unpatriotic act in Turkey.

Akbulut insists that this should not be taken to imply that a degrowth transition is impossible within a nation-state, but rather that it requires 'a reorientation of state–society relationships around a non-growth collective interest, and a reorganization of economic relations in a way that will mitigate the need that material concessions (enabled by economic growth) fulfils for subordinate classes'. The Zapatistas come in mind here as an attempt for a reorientation of state-society relations and their material base. Self-governance is a central question for the Adivasi too, and in Greece the conflict between Greece and EU institutions can be read as a conflict over the purpose of the state and different territorial jurisdictions. In Turkey Akbulut points to the far distant counterparts of the Zapatistas, the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM), who not coincidentally are the only that challenge the hegemony of growth in Turkey with imaginaries of 'Democratic Autonomy'. Their vision of communal economy includes a 'minimization of fossil fuel consumption', a 'de-commodification of land, water, energy' and 'equity and ecological limits', 'limited by needs and use value rather than exchange value and profit'.

From transformation to releasement

If a change in state configurations is essential for degrowth, even more important is a 'metamorphosis in being', argues Heikkurinen in the contribution that closes this issue. While other contributions deal with the prospects of radical transformation, Heikkurinen invites us to stand back and consider the perils of so-called transformations. 'Every act of transformation requires matter-energy, adding to the cumulative throughput of societies'; 'all human-induced transformations require further non-humans to be transformed ... and the more transformative action there will be, the more matter-energy is required'. Heikkurinen takes issue with the 'will to transform', this 'insatiable urge to endlessly transform' the world which he finds central to growth society and behind the obsession with technology.

Degrowth ends up not very different from green growth to the extent that it 'encourages humankind to keep transforming things but doing so differently, and with better quality'. Heikkurinen notes with a certain dose of irony how the degrowth community 'with its million-dollar research projects and conference travel' may end up creating 'an industry with a growth imperative of its own'. But what the Earth needs 'is precisely less human action (not only better action)'. Heikkurinen invokes Žižek's critique of the fetishism of action, defending the case for sitting back and thinking, against the pseudo-activist temptation to act frantically to save the world.

One may be tempted to respond that the Zapatistas, the Adivasi or the Kurds may not have the luxury of Žižek to sit back and think, watching their livelihoods being destroyed. But that would be a facile dismissal of an anthropological critique of a Western mode of being that should not be taken lightly (not to mention that the Zapatistas or the Kurds produced an astonishing amount of intellectual output while fighting). Heikkurinen's critique is reminiscent of one of the fundamental philosophical debates of the 'anti-utilitarian movement' of thought, in which Serge Latouche and other French degrowth intellectuals cut their teeth. Sociologist Onofrio Romano has called for a degrowth 'strategy of absence', imagining an anthropological subject that does not take itself too seriously, even to the point of uselessly expending its resources, rather than directing them productively in the service of accumulation (Romano, 2012). This idea of retreat and of an unproductive expenditure of surplus – as an antidote to a capitalist logic of calculation and accumulation - has been central for a certain line of degrowth thinking inspired by the work of Georges Bataille (see D'Alisa et al, 2014b; Romano, 2014, Kallis, 2018).

Heikkurinen arrives to a similar point but from the different route of Heidegger, advocating a posture of 'releasement' – 'a willing not to will'. Humans should refrain from using always the power that they have – they should learn to let go, Heikkurinen insists, echoing the idea of self-limitation, a conscious choice to not do everything that can be done, or pursue everything that can be pursued (see Kallis, 2019). Against transformers, Heikkurinen wants to see more 'releasers', 'practitioners of letting-be … wanting un-willing'. The core question for him is how individuals and collectives, such as those involved in social or ecological movements, can really get rid of the will to transform and undergo a metamorphosis in being. A meditative and reflective waiting is the key experience, he argues (alongside the necessary work of subsistence and the unproductive expenditure of dances and parties). Ending his piece provocatively, he encourages us to stop trying to make an ever-

bigger impact on the world, and 'wait instead for the unexpected' while 'preparing for the expected', 'the collapse of civilization', after which 'the world will unfold differently'.

5. Future research questions

The potential for geographers to make innovative contributions to the degrowth research agenda is clear from this special issue. Previous degrowth research has often focused on macro-economic and broad brush political analyses, focussing on depersonalized resource or monetary flows. The papers included in this volume focus on actual case studies, from the exploited lands of Southern India and the targeted by the narco-traffickers forests of the Chiapas, to the austerity-hit streets of Athens or the flooded riverbanks of Sussex. As Varvaroussis (this issue) claims, the theory of degrowth has to advance from slogan, to a reasoned account of how and why can actual capitalist societies change direction within a context of crisis. Our contributors point to a research agenda which examines not only the obvious candidates for degrowth case studies (e.g. urban gardens, eco-villages or other nowtopian projects in world cities), but also to 'the many less visible movements and peoples throughout the world [who] are also engaged in resurgence as they reconnect to reach or to recover sufficiency and remake territories and worlds threatened by growth-driven development, neoliberal globalization and climate change' (Nirmal and Rocheleau, this issue). And, as Geary notes, if we focus on reproductive labour we may find unconscious degrowth nowtopians in the most unexpected corners: from pensioner environmentalists to self-organizing caretaking mothers and fathers. The subjects of degrowth and self-limitation go beyond counter-cultural or green activists and may well include those individuals or collectives who are adapting to austerity, downsizing, reconfiguring and transforming their lives in all manner of ways.

Nirmal and Rocheleau's contribution, with its attention to intersectionality, and the ways in which gender, ethnicity and race interact in territorial struggles open up new vistas for degrowth research. Muradian's (2019) critique that the degrowth discourse is limited to questions speaking to the concerns of green European intellectuals, has some basis, in so far as the extant literature has failed to engage convincingly with issues of race or gender. As far as gender is concerned, this has begun to change, with contributions like those of Pérez Orozco (2014), who squarely locates degrowth as a project of care and re-productivity, premised on a revaluation and redistribution of carework. Dengler and Strunk

(2019) show how ecological processes and caring activities are structurally devalued by the monetized economy in a growth paradigm and how degrowth not only promotes the alleviation of environmental injustices but also calls for a recentering of society around care . Within the context of the biennial degrowth conferences, participants launched a 'Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA)'[7], and research on feminisms features strongly in the degrowth conferences. These endeavours stand to benefit from more engagement with the type of research developed by Rocheleau and colleagues, along the lines of feminist political ecology and emotional geographies (Nightingale, 2013, Gonzalez-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017, Singh, 2017, Harcourt, 2019) with their emphasis on differential forms of belonging, relationships between bodies, spaces and environments, including non-human actors, a blind spot in degrowth research until now. Questions of race also have received limited attention, reflecting a broader lack of engagement with race in the environmental justice literature coming from Europe. Like gender, important questions here involve the differential impacts of growth-driven development along lines of race or class, the racialized assumptions built in growth discourses, as well as the reproduction of race prejudices or exclusions in seemingly alternative or nowtopian efforts and politics.

Geographies of degrowth can shed more light on how different vulnerable subjects, working (or not) through their differences, struggle to defend and create new commons. How do they reconfigure – or try to reconfigure - territories, places and states along the way? How do they network, cultivating a potential global sense of connection and solidarity through participation in disparate resurgent or nowtopian projects (see Lloveras, this issue)? What sort of alternatives to growth-based development do they signify with their struggles, what political strategies, and under what conditions, could promote such alternatives, and what structural obstacles do they face, given the current constitution of the State and the ways capitalist economies function? Geographers can mobilize their conceptual tools to shed more light both on how the hegemony of growth is constantly reproduced, politically and economically, and to probe the openings of new counter-hegemonies (Akbulut, this issue). This requires a visualization of the cross-border linkages that connect consumption and extraction, growth and resurgence against growth, destruction and renewal (Nirmal and Rocheleau, this issue). Geographers have much to contribute to our knowledge of how and why new territories of difference are being produced. This is an exciting research

[7] see: https://www.degrowth.info/en/feminisms-and-degrowth-alliance-fada/

agenda, and we hope that this edited volume spurs more research by geographers on these topics.

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