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① major logic of degrowth → crazy growth only benefits a few

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What does degrowth mean? A few points of clarification

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ABSTRACT
Degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being. Over the past few years, the idea has attracted significant attention among academics and social movements, but for people new to the idea it raises a number of questions. Here I set out to clarify three specific issues: (1) I specify what degrowth means, and argue that the framing of degrowth is an asset, not a liability; (2) I explain how degrowth differs fundamentally from a recession; and (3) I affirm that degrowth is primarily focused on high-income nations, and explore the implications of degrowth for the global South.

KEYWORDS
Degrowth; COVID-19; recession; global South

Start talk w/ moment of silence for covid victims. how to mourn.

integrating arch. with social science literature

Introduction

Human civilization is presently overshooting a number of critical planetary boundaries and faces a multi-dimensional crisis of ecological breakdown, including dangerous climate change, ocean acidification, deforestation and biodiversity collapse ① (Lenton et al., 2020; Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015; Steffen et al., 2018). Contrary to the general narrative about the Anthropocene, this crisis is not being caused by human beings *as such*, but by a particular economic system: a system that is predicated on perpetual expansion, disproportionately to the benefit of a small minority of rich ② people (Moore, 2015).

The relationship between economic growth and ecological breakdown is now well demonstrated ~~in the empirical record~~. In mainstream economics, the dominant claim is that we must continue to pursue perpetual growth (see Hickel, 2018a), and therefore must seek to decouple GDP from ecological impacts and make growth 'green'. Unfortunately, green growth hopes have little grounding. in reality There is no historical evidence of long-term absolute decoupling of GDP from resource use (as measured by material footprint), and all extant models project that it cannot be achieved even under optimistic conditions (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Vadén, Lähde, Majava, Järvensivu, Toivanen, & Eronen 2020; Vadén et al. 2020b). Absolute decoupling of GDP from emissions can be achieved simply by replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy; but this cannot be done quickly enough to respect carbon budgets for 1.5°C and 2°C if the economy continues to grow at usual rates. More growth means more energy demand, and more energy demand makes it all the more difficult to cover it with renewables in the short time we have left (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Raftery et al., 2017; Schroder & Storm, 2020).

arch = green growth, eco-modern

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① we could add: pandemic threats at the human-animal interface. inequities of racial capitalism.

In light of this evidence, scientists and ecological economists are increasingly calling for a shift to 'post-growth' and 'degrowth' strategies. The 2018 special report of the IPCC indicates that, in the absence of speculative negative-emissions technologies, the only feasible way to remain within safe carbon budgets is for high-income nations to actively slow down the pace of material production and consumption (Grubler et al., 2018; IPCC, 2018). Reducing material throughput reduces energy demand, which makes it easier to accomplish a rapid transition to renewables. This approach is also ecologically coherent: reducing material throughput not only helps us to address climate change, but also removes pressure on other planetary boundaries.

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This is known as 'degrowth'. Degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource throughput designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being (Kallis, 2018; Latouche, 2009). It is important to clarify that degrowth is *not* about reducing GDP, but rather about reducing throughput. From an ecological perspective, that is what matters. Of course, it is important to accept that reducing throughput is likely to lead to a reduction in the rate of GDP growth, or even a decline in GDP itself, and we have to be prepared to manage that outcome in a safe and just way. This is what degrowth sets out to do.

BUILDINGS

While degrowth theory is attracting increasing attention among academics and social movements, for people new to the idea it raises a number of questions. Here I address questions about language and terminology, questions about economic recession, and questions about international political economy and the North–South divide.

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The language of degrowth

Many of the objections to degrowth have to do with the term itself. Some people worry that degrowth introduces confusion because it is not, in fact, the opposite of growth. When people say 'growth' they normally mean growth in GDP, so one might reasonably assume that degrowth is likewise focused on reducing GDP. Proponents of degrowth are therefore condemned to perpetually clarify that degrowth is not about reducing GDP, but rather about reducing material and energy throughput. It would seem that this creates unnecessary problems.

But, in fact, the problem here arises from the word growth, not degrowth. In reality, people pursue growth not in order to increase an abstract number (GDP), but because they want to consume or do more, which of course requires using more materials and energy. So when economists and politicians talk about growth they *really* mean an increase in materials and energy (and specifically an increase in *commodified* materials and energy), even though this is not stated outright. The preoccupation with GDP is a fetish that obscures this fact; it makes it seem as though growth is immaterial when in reality it is not. If GDP growth did not come along with an increase in material consumption, people would not pursue it (what's the point of having a higher income if it doesn't enable you to expand military spending, buy bigger houses and faster cars, or pay people to do things for you?). In this sense, degrowth, with its focus on reducing material and energy use (and reducing patterns of commodification), is in fact an appropriate opposite to growth, and indeed clarifies what growth itself is actually about.

Now, one might ask, why use the term degrowth at all, when you could just say 'we want to reduce energy and material throughput' and avoid the confusion? There are a few reasons for this. First, most economists would agree that reducing energy and material throughput is important, but they assume this can be accomplished while continuing to pursue economic growth at the same time (indeed, they may even believe that more growth will eventually lead to a reduction in throughput). We need some way of distinguishing the degrowth position from this standard 'green growth' assumption. If we accept the empirical evidence that green growth is unlikely to be achieved, then we have to accept that

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① articles and books

multi-fam
office
institutional / hospitality

somehow more general / best practices

dissemination → exhibitions.

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reducing throughput will impact on GDP itself, and we must focus on how to restructure the economy so that this can be managed in a safe and just way. For this, 'degrowth' is a simple, handy term that allows us to clarify what is at stake, and concentrates the mind on what is required.

Proponents of degrowth often argue that the word degrowth is useful as a 'missile' word. For an increasing number of people, it is obvious that perpetual growth is a problem; for them, degrowth seems intuitively correct as a response to ecological crisis, and they can get on board immediately. Other people have a negative initial reaction to the word, but it is nonetheless useful in such cases to the extent that it challenges and disrupts people's assumptions about how the economy should work, by questioning something that is generally taken for granted as natural and good. In many cases, negative initial reactions give way to contemplation (do high-income countries really need more growth?), and then curiosity (perhaps we can actually flourish with less throughput, and even less output?), and then investigation (what is the relevant empirical evidence?) that eventually leads people to change their views. This kind of intellectual transformation is enabled, not inhibited, by using a provocative term. Trying to avoid provocation, or trying to be agnostic about growth, creates a milieu where problematic assumptions remain unidentified and unexamined in favour of polite conversation and agreement. This is not an effective way to advance knowledge, especially when the stakes are so high.

Some people worry about using degrowth because it is a 'negative' term, rather than positive. But it is only negative if we start from the assumption that more growth is good and desirable. If we want to challenge that assumption, and argue the opposite (that more growth is unnecessary and damaging, and that it would be better if we slowed down), then degrowth is a positive term. Take the words colonization and decolonization, for example. We know that those who engaged in colonization felt it was a good thing. From their perspective – which was the dominant perspective in Europe for most of the past 500 years – decolonization would therefore seem negative. But the point is precisely to challenge the dominant perspective, because the dominant perspective is wrong. Indeed, today we can agree that this stance – a stance against colonization – is correct and valuable: we stand against colonization, and believe that the world would be better without it. That is not a negative vision, but positive; one that's worth rallying around. Similarly, we can and should aspire to an economy without growth just as we aspire to a world without colonization.

We can take this observation one step further. It is important to recognize that the word 'growth' has become a kind of propaganda term. In reality, what is going on is a process of elite accumulation, the commodification of commons, and the appropriation of human labour and natural resources – a process that is quite often colonial in character. This process, which is generally destructive to human communities and to ecology, is glossed as growth. Growth sounds natural and positive (who could possibly be against growth?) so people are easily persuaded to buy into it, and to back policies that will generate more of it, when otherwise they might not. Growth is the ideology of capitalism, in the Gramscian sense. It is the core tenet of capitalism's cultural hegemony. The word degrowth is powerful and effective because it identifies this trick, and rejects it. Degrowth calls for the reversal of the processes that lie behind growth: it calls for disaccumulation, decommodification, and decolonization.

Degrowth vs recession

Another common question about degrowth has to do with recessions. Indeed, when the COVID-19 recession hit, some detractors of degrowth pointed to it as an example of why degrowth would be a disaster. For the most part, this is not a good-faith argument but rather an intentional attempt to mislead, for it is impossible to make this mistake with even a cursory reading of the actual literature

on degrowth. In fact, degrowth is in every way the opposite of a recession. We have different words for them because they are different things. Here are six key differences worth noting:

(1) Degrowth is a planned, coherent policy to reduce ecological impact, reduce inequality, and improve well-being. Recessions are not planned, and do not target any of these outcomes. They are not intended to reduce ecological impact (even though this might in some cases be an unintended outcome), and they are certainly not intended to reduce inequality and improve well-being – indeed, they do the opposite.
(2) Degrowth has a discriminating approach to reducing economic activity. It seeks to scale down ecologically destructive and socially less necessary production (i.e. the production of SUVs, arms, beef, private transportation, advertising and planned obsolescence), while expanding socially important sectors like healthcare, education, care and conviviality. Recessions, by contrast, do not discriminate so wisely. Indeed, they quite often destroy socially important sectors while empowering socially less necessary sectors. In the present COVID crisis, for instance, schools, recreational facilities and public transportation are negatively affected, while Amazon is expanding and stocks are rallying.
(3) Degrowth introduces policies to prevent unemployment, and indeed even to *improve* employment, such as by shortening the working week, introducing a job guarantee with a living wage, and rolling out retraining programmes to shift people out of sunset sectors. Degrowth is explicitly focused on maintaining and improving people's livelihoods despite a reduction in aggregate economic activity. Recessions, by contrast, result in mass unemployment and everyday people suffer loss of livelihood.
(4) Degrowth seeks to reduce inequality and share national and global income more fairly, such as with progressive taxation and living wage policies. Recessions, by contrast, tend to make inequality worse. Again, the COVID crisis presents an example of this, where the response packages (QE, corporate bailouts, etc.) have made the rich richer (specifically to the benefit of asset owners), and billionaires have added billions to their wealth, while virtually everybody else has lost, with the poorest 50% of humanity losing $4.4 billion per day (Sumner et al., 2020).
(5) Degrowth seeks to expand universal public goods and services, such as health, education, transportation and housing, in order to decommodify the foundational goods that people need in order to lead flourishing lives. Recessions, by contrast, generally entail austerity measures that cut spending on public services.
(6) Degrowth is part of a plan to achieve a rapid transition to renewable energy, restore soils and biodiversity, and reverse ecological breakdown. During recessions, by contrast, governments typically abandon such objectives in order to instead focus everything on getting growth going again, whatever the ecological cost might be.

We have different words for recession and degrowth because they are different things. Recessions happen when growth-dependent economies stop growing: it is a disaster that ruins people's lives and exacerbates injustices. Degrowth calls for a different kind of economy altogether: an economy that does not require growth in the first place, and which can deliver justice and well-being even while throughput declines.

Degrowth and the global South

Some people worry that proponents of degrowth want to see degrowth universally applied, in all countries. This would be problematic, because clearly many poor countries in fact need to increase

resource and energy use in order to meet human needs. In reality, proponents of degrowth are clear that it is specifically high-income countries that need to degrow (or, more specifically, countries that exceed per capita fair-shares of planetary boundaries by a significant margin; see Hickel, 2019), not the rest of the world. Again, because degrowth is focused on reducing excess resource and energy use, it does not apply to economies that are not characterized by excess resource and energy use.

This brings us to an important implication of degrowth policy. The vast majority of ecological breakdown is being driven by excess consumption in the global North, and yet has consequences that disproportionately damage the South. We can see this in terms of both emissions and material extraction. (1) The North is responsible for 92% of global CO2 emissions in excess of the safe planetary boundary (Hickel, 2020a), and yet the South suffers the vast majority of climate change-related damages (in terms of both monetary costs as well as loss of life). (2) High-income countries rely on a large *net* appropriation of resources from the rest of the world (equivalent to 50% of their total consumption). In other words, resource consumption in the North has an ecological impact that registers largely in the South (Dorninger et al., 2020).

In terms of both emissions and resource use, then, excess consumption in the North relies on patterns of colonization: the appropriation of the South's fair share of atmospheric commons, and the plunder of Southern ecosystems. From this perspective, degrowth in the North represents a process of decolonization in the South, to the extent that it releases communities in the South from the pressures of atmospheric colonization and material extractivism.

Still, some worry that degrowth in the North might have a negative impact on economies in the South. After all, many global South economies rely heavily on exports of raw materials and light manufactures to the North. If Northern demand declines, where will they get their revenues? This might seem like a reasonable question on the face of it, but it rests on a problematic logic, namely, that excess consumption in the North must continue to rise, even if it causes ecological breakdown that disproportionately harms the South, because it is necessary for the South's development and *is ultimately for the South's own good*. This argument echoes arguments that were regularly made under colonialism, namely, that extraction and exploitation by the colonizer is ultimately good for the colonized. For instance, Nicholas Kristof, in a *New York Times* column titled 'Three cheers for sweatshops' has argued that sweatshops are the best way to get people out of poverty, so we need more of them: if we care about the poor, we should not boycott sweatshop products but rather consume more of them.

The fallacy in this argument shouldn't need to be pointed out. Obviously, the best way to reduce poverty isn't more exploitation, but more economic justice: the South should receive fair prices for the labour and resources they render to the global economy. No one would ever suggest that an American company paying American workers $2 a day is a good way to reduce poverty in America; we would insist that reducing poverty requires paying a living wage. But for some reason this logic is not applied to workers in the South, likely because it would reduce the rate of surplus accumulation among Northern companies and countries that rely on Southern labour and resources. In other words, justice for the South (fair wages for labour and fair prices for resources) would entail degrowth in the North. We should embrace this outcome. In fact, abandoning the pursuit of growth in the North would be salutary inasmuch as it would remove the constant pressure applied by Northern governments and companies to depress the costs of labour and resources in the South.

This brings us to another, related point. Degrowth in the North creates space for Southern economies to shift away from their enforced role as exporters of cheap labour and raw materials, and to focus instead on developmentalist reforms: building economies focused on sovereignty, self-sufficiency, and human well-being. This was the approach pursued by most global South governments in the immediate post-colonial decades, during the 1960s and 1970s, before the imposition

of neoliberal structural adjustment from the 1980s onward (Hickel, 2018b). Structural adjustment sought to dismantle developmentalist reforms across the South in order to create new frontiers for Northern accumulation. In a degrowth scenario the pressure for this 'fix' would be ameliorated, and Southern governments would find themselves freer to pursue a more human-centered economics (Hickel, 2020b; Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). Here too, it becomes clear that degrowth in the North represents decolonization in the South.

Of course, the global South need not and should not wait for decolonization; they can cast off the chains themselves. Here I have in mind Samir Amin's notion of 'delinking': the refusal to submit national development policy to the imperatives of Northern capital. For instance, global South governments could organize collectively to increase the prices of their labour and resources, and could mobilize to demand fairer terms of trade and finance, and more democratic representation in global governance (as they did with the New International Economic Order in the early 1970s). These ideas are today represented in the discourse of post-development. In addition to rejecting the tenets of neoliberal globalization, post-development thought also rejects the notion (introduced by colonizers and international financial institutions) that GDP growth should be pursued for its own sake, preferring instead a focus on human well-being (Escobar, 2015; Kothari et al., 2019).

Either way, decolonization in the South along these lines would likely cause degrowth in the North. This is true in a very concrete sense. Right now, high-income nations maintain high levels of income and consumption through an ongoing process of net appropriation (of land, labour, resources and energy) from the South, through unequal exchange: in other words, they seek to depress the prices of labour and resources to below the global average price (Dorninger et al., 2020). This is a continuation of the basic tenets of the colonial relationship, although (in most cases) without the occupation. Ending this exploitative relationship would mean either ending the pattern of net appropriation *or* ending unequal exchange, both of which would likely result in a reduction in the rate of surplus accumulation by economic elites, and a reduction in the growth driven by this accumulation in the North, but to the benefit of communities and ecologies in the global South.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Jason Hickel is an economic anthropologist whose research focuses on global inequality, political economy, and ecological economics. He is the author of a number of books, most recently *Less is more: How degrowth will save the world* (Penguin Random House, 2020) and *The divide: A brief guide to global inequality and its solutions* (Penguin Random House, 2018). In addition to his academic work, he writes for *The Guardian*, *Foreign Policy* and *Al Jazeera*, serves as an advisor for the Green New Deal for Europe, and sits on the Harvard-*Lancet* Commission on Reparations and Redistributive Justice. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

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