Degrowth
A kind of pragmatic utopian thinking, re-politicising humanistic debates

An interview with Dr Helen Jarvis, conducted by Christian Schulz

Helen Jarvis is Professor in Social Geography at Newcastle University, UK. Helen's research focuses, among other things, on the compatibility of family and work, on the significance of public spaces and on the 'social architecture' of new collaborative living arrangements. She is also concerned with the role of civic engagement in sustainable urban development.
https://www.ncl.ac.uk/gps/staff/profile/helenjarvis.html#background

What do degrowth approaches mean for your own research?

Helen Jarvis: I very much embrace degrowth thinking as a social geographer, so for me it is all about the relevance of geography as a scholar-activist. I probably don't think of myself as employing a fully-fledged participatory action research. My degrowth understanding is closely aligned with a kind of pragmatic utopian thinking. So, my collaboration with external partners and a broad based alliance of community organisations, really of bottom-up civil society is probably messier and more about agitating action than it is participatory action research. Indeed, a lot of what I'm doing is not really research at all, it's more about working within civil society. But going back to what I understand as the relevance of degrowth for geography and myself as a social geographer: for me it's about re-politicising humanistic debates concerning where and how we live with each other on the earth. It starts with questions that geography has always worked with in terms of urban development, urban planning, liveability, but it is saying that the question 'where and how we live' is not adequately managed through the current lens of urban planning. We must completely reimagine those relationships.

What can we contribute to 'spatialise' the degrowth debate?

Helen Jarvis: For me, the spatial geography of degrowth is about the scale of living and the scale of civil society alliance and activism. So degrowth is not just an economic concept and the counter-hegemonic narrative that degrowth contributes to, it is more about opening a scale of action both in scholarship, a scale of action that is much more about activism and social change and transformation, but also a scale of activism. My focus, geographically, is on that meso-scale, so it's not about the individual consumer citizen, the individual making choices about how and where they live, but rather the meso-scale of thinking and acting differently. I think re-politicising the urban politics and spatial justice debates allows for – it's not really using the language of degrowth, but I see it as entirely compatible – this idea of conviviality, the political sense of conviviality. What is public space for? It's for this renewed idea of a civil society. There's also a sense of a space that's free from private interests and market interests and the state and is reworking conditions of possibility. It's socio-spatial.

To what extent are our textbook models and theoretical and conceptual underpinnings challenged by degrowth thinking?

Helen Jarvis: I think that social geography has a similar problem, perhaps, to economic geography, certainly in the textbooks, in that there is a tendency I think to slip between this preoccupation with identity politics and the individual and a cultural social geography of identity and a sense of 'where is the radical critique?'. Maybe that's not really the way to express it, I suppose I don't see a lot of the degrowth discourse or degrowth as a counter-hegemonic narrative entering social geography. And I also have always been a little bit frustrated by this disconnect between, for instance, issues around the housing crisis and the social justice side of that, and precarious employment and the corrosion of working life and the social justice implications of that, and bigger debates around nature and environmental sustainability. So, degrowth discourse, for me, as many advocates talk about it, this kind of missile concept, this bombshell, a symbolic term, it's an opportunity to say there isn't a kind of meta-theory that's going to make solutions between social and economic justice align together. But this bombshell concept does allow us to recognise the interdependence, the mosaic of things like housing,

employment, and social everyday realities, such as feelings of isolation or inclusion and the conventional hyper-privatised neighbourhood.

This goes back, in terms of my journey, to the work I did years ago now, 2001–2005. I was working closely around work-life balance, I wrote the book *Work/Life City Limits* in 2005, and I didn't use the word degrowth, but looking back it was entirely about engaging with the ideas of degrowth. I talked about practical limits to growth, and it was bound up in this meso-scale of home-work family nexus, and I felt it was critically important to revive this idea of human-environment connections but not in the way that actor-network theory was more than representational: it was instead about everyday pragmatism. Where are the limits to the possibilities for people to act intentionally, to consciously follow the grain of a moral limits to growth, to do what they feel is right for their ethic of care? In current parlance this would be in the context of climate emergency. So, as far as the early inspiration of degrowth, I was motivated by the work of Anders Hayden: he wrote this book called 'Sharing the work, sparing the planet', and he was talking there about working hours reduction – as one part of a virtuous circle of reducing over- and excessive consumption and waste. And what was useful about this was that it offered a simple way into degrowth, but what I also liked was that it very easily linked that nexus of 'where and how we live' in relation to housing, transport and commuting, the everyday decisions of getting children to and from school, whether we walk and cycle, whether we can walk or cycle, the relationship of space and time. He conceptualised, in a compelling way, all that most vicious or virtuous connectedness that either locks us into a very unsustainable and exploitative relationship with others and the planet or allows us to step out of that lock-in effect.

So, the notion of scale seems to play a major role in your work?

Helen Jarvis: I wouldn't want you to take away from this discussion that I privilege the local. Obviously, the work I do around collaborative housing and cohousing is about a scale of belonging and intentional practice. This scale is necessarily limited in size. Cohousing schemes tend to view this optimal scale as around 25 households while the intentional 'we thinking' practised in an eco-village would be around 150 people. Both examples describe an intimate scale of belonging and collaboration. At the same time, it would be wrong to extract these intentional scales from their wider ecology. This

multi-scale thinking resonates with what Ivan Illich conjured up really nicely in the notion of a 'commune of communes' whereby you could say that the scale of belonging is nested within multiple scales that are 'scaled out' rather than 'scaled up': not one large scale of region, but a region made up of scaled-out intimate scales of belonging. A good example of that would be the current social movements of lasting change around the school climate change strike (I was at one on Friday), and Extinction Rebellion. These all operate through a process of social affinity groups. The language of an affinity group, or the scale of an affinity group, is aligned with face-to-face alliances whereby people can build relationships of trust and seek common ground. For example, I'm involved with Citizens UK which is broad-based community organising, a bit like the Barrack Obama model of community organising, and this is on a person to person scale of listening to what the problems are and then acting collectively on achievable, meaningful change. This way it's helpful to think of scale rather than territory because these are spatial scales that are necessarily interpersonal and context dependent, so the local isn't just a scale of belonging, it's of the earth, or the terroir. Slow-food and slow-cities movements also show this, as well as Extinction Rebellion. When it works with an indigenous local knowledge, it's about what gives meaning and purpose to environmental action, in and of, a place. So, I don't want to sound like I'm wanting the best of all worlds here, but I don't think it should be a debate of 'is the local or is the region the most relevant geographic spatial lens?'. For me, as a social geographer, it's about the interpersonal and the empowered ability to act as changemaker.

How do you convey the notion of degrowth in your teaching?

Helen Jarvis: Well, I think there is a problem with language, and in my undergraduate teaching, I tend not to use the term degrowth. It's not very easily understood. It doesn't translate very well; it becomes quite abstract. Again, I tend to draw upon the language of civic activism, and on alliances and co-operation and on the ability to unlock the capacity to act. I draw a distinction between individuals acting on their own lifestyle habits as being quite disadvantaged, and I demonstrate alternative forms of groupwork and group dynamics. To help overcome the language barriers, I introduce scenarios and examples of inspirational degrowth activists and scholars into my teaching. I have a set of cards that tell the stories of urban food growers

and people who have organised local sharing economies. These provide a real name, a face and a story, to offer a joined-up belief in degrowth practice. It is difficult for students to relate to degrowth when it is presented in a theoretical and abstract way and that has caused quite a lot of misunderstanding. Degrowth theory is widely considered either to be very fuzzy or very ideological, so to cut through that I go to the level of introducing my own perspective. I say 'I'm a single parent, it's crazy how I have to manage a house and all aspects of a private life, and working full-time', and all these things 'I'm one person', and then I say 'when I've gone to stay in Christiania, or a cohousing project, it has been possible to live collaboratively, in a more tribal way, with others, to raise children together and to organise our housing solutions and work collectively'. So, I introduce a lot of myself as a practical way of cutting through that fuzzy, ideological understanding of degrowth. And that says that I acknowledge having reached a point in my life as a parent, and I'm thinking here of the climate emergency, where I must act – we must act. In that respect the methods of teaching are about hope and the real potential we must harness to make a difference collectively, rather than as individual consumers.

I'm taking a group of students in the spring to Copenhagen, for an annual field trip. I usually take them to a housing cooperative or cohousing scheme, as well as to the former squatters' settlement of Christiania, where I've done some research before. But I'm also going to be meeting up with some anthropology scholars at Copenhagen University who have been making comparisons between the kind of environmental sensibility and mindset that most Copenhageners are encouraged to practice, recycling in their households, and travelling by bicycle etc., versus more intentional ways of reducing energy use through sharing, in cohousing but also in eco-communities. This is interesting because it shows us what we can achieve collectively that we can't manage individually. And it's not just about the scale, it's about the social learning that takes place, we retain privacy but when we live a little more consciously with others and make decisions that have a bigger impact on others, I think it pushes us to degrow, to step off the treadmill of work and consumption.

If you were given an unconditional degrowth research grant allowing you to hire a postdoc for two years, what would be the topical focus of your project?

Helen Jarvis: I am very interested – and this is going to sound more esoteric, when you are given the opportunity to reflect and research in more depth, it does come down to more a burning curiosity – I'm very interested in this sense of intentionality: we are all torn between contradictions to do the right thing but also to live in the now, and I think there's something about working in a group, collaboratively, which is incredibly difficult. I know this from all the endless committee meetings I sit on to try and make change happen. So, I am motivated to explore this socio-cultural but also psychological and socio-technical infrastructure of intentionality: what really will facilitate and unlock collaboration? How do we scale out a new 'normal' of being intentional in a way that stimulates this virtuous cycle of being intentional for people and the planet? It could be that I would explore this through a movement such as Extinction Rebellion, because within that movement, there's been a real tension between anarchy, where people pursue their own action, the example here was that there was some direct action of jumping on trains and public transport which seemed to completely contradict the idea that public transport is a good thing for the environment. So, my ideal research would harness the power of groups and collaboration, allowing that to go in myriad different directions. I'm interested in this tension between harnessing the power of collaboration and citizen action, civic action, but also this idea of what soft infrastructure would propel 'we-thinking' and intentional behaviour, intentional practice, to reach beneficial results for the planet, for the people of the planet.

I have a longer-term goal to write a book, and there's a suggested working title: 'Being intentional for people and planet'. It would be an anthology of my work on various apparently quite radical eco-communities in different places. What do we learn from them about different capacities to change and to work collaboratively?