

From Downscaling to Global Justice

Towards a Convergence of Climate Reparations and Degrowth

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On 17 October 2022, almost 30 scientists from “Scientists Rebellion” and activists from a Southern-led international group “Debt for Climate” entered Germany’s finance ministry, occupied the main representative hall, a balcony, and Finance Minister Christian Lindner’s office, holding banners and partly gluing themselves onto windows and desks. I was part of this action. Outside, representatives from the most affected peoples and areas (MAPA) were giving interviews to the press, underscoring the urgency of the demands.¹ And inside, we read out a letter demanding the immediate cancellation of all Global South debt as a first step towards climate reparations:

It is high time that reparations are paid, not only as a means of recognizing the effects of (neo-)colonialism past and present, but also to compensate for the immense transfer of value from the South to the North that has been occurring through unequal exchange, repatriated profits etc.

1 Spiegel (2022). *Protest in Berlin – Klimaaktivisten dringen ins Finanzministerium ein*. Accessible at: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/berlin-klimaaktivisten-dringen-ins-finanzministerium-ein-a-5be59123-13bb-4778-89cc-b075d5f28a19>.

Not only were some of the arguments for the action directly related to the notion of “degrowth”, but scientists also pasted key academic papers on the walls of the ministry, among them papers introducing degrowth research and justifying degrowth with reference to unequal exchange and imperialist appropriation by the Global North.²

I want to take this action, covered prominently in national media, as a starting point, since it is one of the few instances in social movements and academic discourse of a strong intersection between degrowth and reparations arguments – an alliance, I want to argue, that is essential to both. In essence, I want to make a twofold argument about the need to closely interlink degrowth and (ecological) reparations. Both discourses, sets of policies and related movements could gain from strengthening their connections and a mutual integration of core perspectives and demands. Yet building these links demands careful work of alliance-building that takes differences of power, access to resources, and intersectional social hierarchies into account.

On the one hand, degrowth should develop into a global justice perspective by integrating demands for (ecological) reparations, freedom of movement, and a global-justice oriented reshaping of the international economic system – demands most prominently articulated by Global South movements. Without this global justice outlook, degrowth risks becoming an inward-looking, provincial, localized, and eventually exclusive project within Europe and the Global North – one that focuses on securing decent living within northern regions that are involved in “degrowth”, but that is insulating itself from the catastrophes of the climate emergency unravelling in the most affected areas globally.³

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- 2 These papers were pasted on the wall: Hickel, Jason; Dorninger, Christian; Wieland, Hanspeter & Suwandi, Intan (2022). Imperialist Appropriation in the World Economy: Drain from the Global South through Unequal Exchange, 1990–2015. *Global Environmental Change* 73; Kallis, Giorgos; Kostakis, Vasilis; Lange, Steffen; Muraca, Barbara; Paulson, Susan & Schmelzer, Matthias (2018). Research on Degrowth. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, 291–316.
 - 3 Schmelzer, Matthias; Vetter, Andrea & Vansintjan, Aaron (2022). *The Future Is Degrowth*. London/New York: Verso Books.

On the other hand, demands for reparations – strongly articulated from the Global South – should incorporate the call for degrowth in the Global North. Without this call for degrowth – which can, of course, be articulated by using different words – the reparations agenda risks a key opportunity to address core structural and systemic drivers of extractive processes that will negatively overcompensate all reparations. The fast and massive reductions of Global North emissions that are necessary to guarantee non-repetition of past harms – while at the same time working to end the imperial mode of living⁴ and the Global North appropriation of labor and resources⁵ – will require, so the argument goes, transformations in the rich countries along the lines of degrowth.

Degrowth – From Downscaling to Global Justice?

‘Degrowth’ is a term that is increasingly mobilized by scholars and activists to criticize the hegemony of growth – and a proposal for a radical reorganization of society that leads to a drastic reduction in the use of energy and resources and that is deemed necessary, desirable, and possible. The notion started to gain prominence in the 2000s first in France and Southern Europe and has since spread around the globe – but due to its specific focus, mainly in the Global North. Degrowth starts from the fact – demonstrated by an increasing number of studies – that further economic growth in industrialized countries is unsustainable. Even if that growth is ‘green’ or ‘inclusive’, or even as part of a transformative progressive agenda that massively invests in renewable energies and the sustainability transition, industrialized countries cannot reduce their environmental impact (emissions, material throughput, etc.) fast enough and sufficiently while, at the same time, growing their economies. The transformation needed in industrialized countries –

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- 4 Brand, Ulrich & Wissen, Markus (2021). *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism*. New York: Verso.
 - 5 Patnaik, Utsa & Patnaik, Prabhat (2021). *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present*. New York: NYU Press; Hickel et al. (2022), op. cit.

if they are to reduce their emissions and environmental impacts fast enough to leave space for the Global South to develop – will also lead to reducing the size of Global North economies.

While this need for sufficiency, a reduction of the material throughput for the most affluent, or an end to overconsumption may sound radical to many, it is increasingly common ground among ecologically oriented progressives, from climate justice activists to feminist groups, from radical proponents of a Green New Deal to authors of the IPCC assessment reports.⁶ Degrowth claims that such a transformation in the Global North is not only possible but also desirable: it is feasible to live well without growth and to make society more just, democratic, and truly prosperous on the way. To do this, however, a fundamental political and economic reorganization of society is necessary, which aims at overcoming multiple structural growth dependencies inherent in the capitalist economy.

More specifically, degrowth can be defined as the democratic transition to a society that – in order to enable global ecological justice – is based on a much smaller throughput of energy and resources, that deepens democracy and guarantees a good life and social justice for all, and that does not depend on continuous expansion of economic output.⁷ To achieve this, degrowth advocates abandoning growth as a policy goal and prioritizing sustainability, equity and well-being, to reduce income and wealth inequalities through maximum income caps and wealth taxes, scaling down less necessary and carbon-intensive forms of production that are difficult or impossible to decarbonize (private jets and air travel,

6 Parrique, Timothée (2022). Degrowth in the IPCC AR6 WGIII. *Blog Timothée Parrique*. Accessible at: Degrowth in the IPCC AR6 WGIII – Timothée Parrique (timotheeparrique.com); Mastini, Riccardo; Kallis, Giorgos & Hickel, Jason (2021). A Green New Deal without Growth? *Ecological Economics* 179; Klein, Naomi (2020). *On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal*. New York: Simon & Schuster; Hickel, Jason; Kallis, Giorgos; Jackson, Tim; O'Neill, Daniel W.; Schor, Juliet B.; Steinberger, Julia K.; Victor, Peter A. & Ürge-Vorsatz, Diana (2022). Degrowth Can Work — Here's How Science Can Help. *Nature* 612(7940), 400–403.

7 Schmelzer et al. (2022), op. cit.

SUVs, fast fashion, animal products, weapons, etc.), open-source technologies, reducing work hours and introducing a right to work, reducing all kinds of waste and irrationalities in our economies (planned obsolescence, bullshit jobs), and by strengthening decommodified systems of provisioning.

While policies along these lines – with a strong focus on sufficiency – are increasingly popular, also for example among climate citizens’ assemblies,⁸ degrowth has also been criticized, not just by advocates defending the growth-oriented status quo, but also by progressives. Degrowth, some authors argue, amounts to an austerity-oriented “politics of less” that alienates working people, is an absurd policy proposal because some sectors do indeed need to grow, and that with its focus on small-scale alternatives and sufficiency distracts from the possibilities of sustainable forms of economic growth in the context of progressive Green New Deals or socialist planning.⁹ While these claims tend to misconstrue degrowth, others are more to the point – in particular, critical analyses from feminist authors and postcolonial perspectives from the Global South that question whether and in how far degrowth applies to the countries of the Global South, and argue that degrowth is a detached, Eurocentric, and abstract idea that has little appeal in the Global South and does not thoroughly critique the unequal global capitalist system.¹⁰

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- 8 Lage, Jonas; Thema, Johannes; Zell-Ziegler, Carina; Best, Benjamin; Cordroch, Luisa & Wiese, Frauke (2023). Citizens Call for Sufficiency and Regulation – A Comparison of European Citizen Assemblies and National Energy and Climate Plans. *Energy Research & Social Science* vol 104, 103254.
 - 9 Huber, Matthew T. (2022). *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet*. London/New York: Verso Books; Chomsky, Noam & Pollin, Robert (2020). *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet*. New York: Verso Books.
 - 10 Dengler, Corinna & Seebacher, Lisa M. (2019). What About the Global South? Towards a Feminist Decolonial Degrowth Approach. *Ecological Economics* 157, 246–252; Rodríguez-Labajos, Beatriz; Yáñez, Ivonne; Bond, Patrick; Greyl, Lucie; Munguti, Serah; Ojo, Godwin U. & Overbeek, Winfridus (2019). Not So Natural an Alliance? Degrowth and Environmental Justice Movements in the Global South. *Ecological Economics* 157, 175–184.

It is in particular on these critiques that I want to build in the next section. Before that, however, it is key to highlight that some of the criticisms are based on misunderstandings – and two need to be clarified.

To begin with, degrowth authors have repeatedly argued that degrowth is not for undifferentiated reduction of GDP as the main lever of emissions reductions. In contrast, degrowth advocates for the selective growth of certain sectors and activities – in particular those that are needed for the sustainability transition, such as massive green infrastructure investments and related macro-financial regimes, retrofitting of houses, care activities, and social provisioning systems that mainly benefit the disadvantaged. But degrowth also formulates active policies to achieve a selective downscaling and de-accumulation of those economic activities that cannot be made sustainable fast enough and that contribute little use value. This is so because sufficiently decoupling GDP growth from emissions in rich countries is unrealistic, and thus aiming for green growth amounts to deepening climate injustice.¹¹

Second, degrowth starts explicitly from a global justice perspective that aims to decolonize the Global North, reduce the rich countries' ecological pressure, and to make space for the Global South – and also for material growth in the Global South. Indeed, a degrowth perspective aims at the convergence of living standards at an equitable and globally sustainable level. While degrowth has allies in the Global South within the broader framework of 'alternatives to development',¹² it mainly focuses on the Global North or, more specifically, on the affluent who maintain what has been called the 'imperial mode of living'.¹³ Degrowth has even started to embrace proposals for a decolonization

11 Vogel, Jefim & Hickel, Jason (2023). Is Green Growth Happening? An Empirical Analysis of Achieved versus Paris-Compliant CO₂–GDP Decoupling in High-Income Countries. *The Lancet Planetary Health* 7(9), e759–e769.

12 Kothari, Ashish; Salleh, Ariel; Escobar, Arturo; Demaria, Federico & Acost, Alberto (eds.) (2019). *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*. Delhi: AuthorUpFront.

13 Brand, Ulrich & Wissen, Markus (2021). *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism*. New York: Verso.

of North–South relations, reparative justice and transfers of resources, technology, and money, which should be strengthened.

Why Degrowth Needs to Incorporate Reparations

In a recent book, we argue that the repercussions of degrowth in industrialized countries on communities in the Global South should be an integral part of the degrowth agenda, from export markets or tourism to the questions of reparations.¹⁴ The key question here, which has not yet been dealt with enough, is: How could degrowth be managed in a way that overcomes global inequalities and does not deepen dependency, while also addressing centuries of colonial and ecological debt on the part of industrialized countries?

The danger is that instead of understanding Dipesh Chakrabarty's¹⁵ call for 'Provincializing Europe' as a call for decolonization, degrowth is framed mainly as living well with less – and becomes an inward-looking, localist provincialism that is mainly concerned with not externalizing the costs of its lifestyles and sees this as effective internationalism. And indeed, as a humble lesson from decades of European and white saviorism that tried to solve the world's problems by intervening elsewhere, this latter perspective is understandable. As argued by Max Ajl, summarizing a widely held view within the degrowth spectrum: "Degrowth in the wealthier world, which would reduce its material impact on the remainder of the planet, is the most effective internationalism, leaving more space for others to live."¹⁶ This was also partly our take when, by framing degrowth as an ecological global justice agenda, we claimed degrowth is in this sense internationalist.¹⁷ However, as Ajl continues,

14 Schmelzer et al. (2022), op. cit.

15 Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2000). *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

16 Ajl, Max (2021). *A People's Green New Deal*. London: Pluto Press, 147.

17 Schmelzer et al. (2022), op. cit.

“there is a thin line between modesty and myopia, an inwards-looking ostrich syndrome, in a country marked by imperial modes of living”.¹⁸

Instead of confronting the complexities and conflicts of international solidarity, there might be the danger that degrowth becomes a self-sufficient but also self-centered movement of localists that would in effect be complicit in silencing demands for supply chain justice, an overhaul of the international trade and financial system, and climate reparations.¹⁹ Further, the common argument that degrowth is a movement only ‘for the North’ misses an opportunity, first, to challenge the indisputably *global* desire for an imperial mode of living,²⁰ and second, to challenge the growth imperatives *imposed* on the Global South through, for example, structural adjustment, odious debt, or sanctions on countries that seek another path to development.²¹

How big is this danger of degrowth myopia? An analysis of existing degrowth literature suggests that the danger is real. While global injustices and the need to reverse them are prominent on the analytical level, there is not much focus on them when it comes to policies. The call for “reparations” for the Global South is not central to or even mentioned in key books on degrowth.²² Also, there are no global justice politics in the often-mentioned lists of degrowth policies, which mainly focus at national or local level. Further, existing literature reviews reveal a striking

18 Ajl (2021), op. cit.

19 Dengler, Corinna & Schmelzer, Matthias (2021). Anmerkungen Zu Niko Paechs Postwachstumsökonomie. Plädoyer für Weniger Individualethik, mehr Kapitalismuskritik und eine Intersektionale Gerechtigkeitsperspektive. *Zeitschrift Für Wirtschafts- Und Unternehmensethik* 22(2), 191–195.

20 Brand & Wissen (2021), op. cit.

21 Schmelzer et al. (2022), op. cit.

22 Kallis, Giorgos (2018). *Degrowth*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing; Liegey, Vincent & Nelson, Anitra (2020). *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide*. London: Pluto Press; Kallis, Giorgos; Paulson, Susan; D’Alisa, Giacomo & Demaria, Federico (2020). *The Case for Degrowth*. Cambridge/Medford: Polity Press.

lack of discussion of degrowth's relations to the Global South and policies such as reparations, for example, or international taxation and trade.²³

If we take into account the full implications of how processes of capitalist growth have fundamentally shaped the entire world, creating the highly unequal distribution of accumulated advantages and disadvantages, of resources, access to goods and services, and related environmental repercussions, then we can see that degrowth as a global justice perspective requires – following a parallel argument around decolonization by Adom Getachew²⁴ – ‘worldmaking after growth’. I am proposing that degrowth – in addition to focusing on the socio-ecological transformation in the Global North and in close alliance with social movements and allies from the Global South – also develops an explicit engagement with a global justice agenda. Since this is a longer-term project that's only in its infancy, in closing I want to present a tentative list of policies that could be discussed along these lines (see Table 5.1).

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- 23 Fitzpatrick, Nick; Parrique, Timothée & Cosme, Inês (2022). Exploring Degrowth Policy Proposals: A Systematic Mapping with Thematic Synthesis. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 365, 132764.
 - 24 Getachew, Adom (2019). *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton, NJ/Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Table 5.1: Worldmaking after growth: Towards an internationalist degrowth agenda.

Provincializing the Global North	Societal limits, caps on resource use – contraction and convergence Stopping the harm: Phasing out fossil fuels (supported by international funds), moratoria on green extractivism, protection of (Indigenous) land rights
(Ecological) reparations	Debt cancellation – Unconditional cash transfer, weighed by accumulated disadvantages funding climate adaptation (fair-share approach) – loss & damage – technology transfer – knowledge commons Cleaning up the ecological mess: Rewilding, drawing down carbon, land reform
Transformation of international trade	Limiting long-distance (energy-intensive) trade, limiting shipping & aviation – globally just delinking, deglobalization, open localism Reversing terms of trade: price stabilizations, supply chain justice, preferential trade agreements, just transitions in the South
Transformation of international monetary and financial system	International currency (Bancor), democratically managed, SDRs Tax justice, ending tax havens, introducing global socio-ecological taxes, capital controls
Governing the global commons	Global democratic institutions – rights of nature – open localism – freedom of movement

Why Reparations Need Degrowth

Climate reparations are policies and measures taken by a state to redress past and present systematic injustices related to the climate crisis and to rebuild the (world) economy in ways that ensure climate justice, well-being, and equality for all globally.²⁵ According to Maxine Burkett, any suc-

25 Perry, Keston (2020). Realising Climate Reparations: Towards a Global Climate Stabilization Fund and Resilience Fund Programme for Loss and Damage

cessful reparations effort must contain three critical elements: an apology; a monetary or other award that gives actual or symbolic weight to that apology; and, most importantly, and a commitment by the perpetrator not to repeat the offending act, also known as the ‘guarantee of nonrepetition’.²⁶

This is a very useful framework to highlight why the reparations agenda – if it is to include effective measures to make sure that the harm actually ends – needs to also take degrowth on board. Within debates on reparations – and related efforts from the Global South to rethink world-making – the first two are prominent: the apology, amounting to the Global North taking full responsibility for the harm done; and – centrally – financial or other kinds of compensation for this past harm. The third element, however, the guarantee of non-repetition, is equally important. I want to argue that to make this commitment to not repeat the offending act – to not continue with large excess emissions, to not just refashion the imperial mode of living in a ‘green’ guise – the Global North needs to degrow. The rich countries need to take rapid mitigation measures that – if the growing number of studies on the decoupling GDP growth from emissions are correct – amount to degrowth.²⁷

in Marginalised and Former Colonised Societies. *SSRN Scholarly Paper*; Táíwò, Olúfemi O. (2022). *Reconsidering Reparations: Worldmaking in the Case of Climate Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press; Stanford-Xosei, Esther (2022). Afrika and Reparations Activism in the UK – Interview. *Review of African Political Economy*. Accessible at: Afrika and reparations activism in the UK - an interview with Esther Stanford-Xosei - ROAPE.

- 26 Burkett, Maxine (2009). Climate Reparations. *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, Vol. 10 (1): 509–42.
- 27 Kallis, Giorgos; Kostakis, Vasilis; Lange, Steffen; Muraca, Barbara; Paulson, Susan & Schmelzer, Matthias (2018). Research on Degrowth. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, 291–316; Schmelzer et al. (2022), op. cit.; Haberl, Helmut; Wiedenhofer, Dominik; Virág, Doris; Kalt, Gerald; Plank, Barbara; Brockway, Paul; Fishman, Tomer; Hausknost, Daniel; Krausmann, Fridolin; Leon-Gruchalski, Bartholomäus; Mayer, Andreas; Pichler, Melanie; Schaffartzik, Anke; Sousa, Tânia; Streeck, Jan & Creutzig (2020). A Systematic Review of the Evidence on Decoupling of GDP, Resource Use and GHG Emissions, Part II: Synthesizing the Insights. *Environmental Research Letters* 15(6).

To conclude: Not only should degrowth incorporate reparations, as the core of an internationalist global solidarity agenda. Calls for reparations should also incorporate a demand that the Global North stops the harm of excess emissions as fast as possible, even if this is only possible by actually reducing energy and resource use and also overall economic activity. The reparations agenda should adopt degrowth – not as a global policy, but as a specific requirement for the rich countries to not cling to destructive growth paradigm if this stands in the way of achieving global justice.