

Book review: Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D’Alisa & Federico Demaria, *The Case for Degrowth*

Review author: Alexander Dunlap

***The Case for Degrowth* by Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D’Alisa & Federico Demaria, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020, 129 pp., plus endnotes and index. US\$12.95 (Paperback), ISBN 978-1-5095-3563-7**

Degrowth is the antidote to capitalist relationships, profiteering and expansion. It challenges the pervasive “more:” annual profits, energy use, consumerism and, overall, the focus on increasing the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Getting to the core of the climate crisis, degrowth advocates for the planned transition to reducing material and energy throughput. Not to be confused with recessions or pandemics, degrowth organizes transition away from crises and, instead, is akin to an overdue corrective to military planner and development theorist Walt Rostow’s *Stages of Growth*, that conceptualized development as the “age of mass consumption” (1960).

The Case for Degrowth is a short, accessible—even friendly—exhibition of degrowth history, ideas and proposals. Despite concerns discussed below, the book is another valuable contribution collectively authored by four leading degrowth scholars. Teaching in Barcelona, the US and Portugal, Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D’Alisa and Federico Demaria have an extensive catalogue of previously authored books spanning the disciplines of ecological economics, anthropology and political ecology.

The Case for Degrowth offers context, outlining key concerns and proposals. “The case for degrowth is a case for stopping the pursuit of growth and for reorienting lives and societies toward wellbeing” (1). Referencing Thunberg’s 2019 UN Climate Action Summit statement, “fairy tales of eternal economic growth,” *The Case for Degrowth* begins with a clear outline of its purpose, the problems and harms of growing economies and the importance of commoning.

The Case for Degrowth goes on to examine the costs of a capitalist economy breaking down the problem of GDP as an economic indicator, debt and financial crisis as key historical events. Continuing to explore the economic, ecological, and psychosocial harms of growth, *The Case for Degrowth* shifts into discussing existing degrowth practices, projects and survival strategies already in action. The Green New Deal; bike paths and collective housing; local food, electricity and artisanal production; yoga, the tiny house movement and, interestingly, “womanhood” since it embodies “modesty and abnegation of personal ambition in favor of commitment to family and community,” are all given as examples of these practices (47).

The Case for Degrowth then turns to examining what the authors call “path-breaking reforms.” This includes “universal incomes and services; policies to reclaim the commons; reductions of working hours; and public finance to support the first four” (65).

The authors celebrate the Green New Deal (GND) as an important opportunity, even though they recognize degrowth is at odds with the “green growth and prosperity” agenda (67). They argue for a universal basic income, reducing work hours, and reclaiming the commons from profit driven organizations through municipalities and cooperatives. In addition, there is a discussion of the necessity of redirecting public finance away from socio-ecologically destructive projects organized around profit instead of wellbeing.

In the chapter on strategy the authors take a Zapatista inspired approach, encouraging “the Global Tapestry of Alternatives to support conditions in which a plurality of pathways can thrive in mutual respect” (104). They distinguish between three transformational strategies: “interstitial (building alternatives in the cracks of the current system), symbiotic (working within systems for reforms), and ruptural (disruption or revolting against dominant systems)” (87). All and all, the degrowth movement is not “purist” and encourages a wide spectrum of political action, from voting to direct action(s).

The Case for Degrowth concludes with an accessible FAQ section, which discusses degrowth positions on green growth, poverty, inequality and ways to start organizing. It is short, concise and designed for a popular audience. Moreover, it does well in weaving together historical events, theory and commonalities of various political positions under the banner of degrowth. I would highly recommend this volume to anyone unfamiliar and curious about degrowth.

On the other hand, I would not recommend *The Case for Degrowth* to people with long-term engagement in political struggle, societies-in-movement and those disinterested in academic-policy debates. Aside from various one-liners like “McDonald’s serve Beyond Meat Burgers” as a positive development (91), I have serious concerns with how the book engages the Green New Deal, approaches and omits local resistance struggles.

The Case for Degrowth ignores the reality of the Green New Deal. It is viewed as an opportunity to impress a degrowth agenda. This approach radically underestimates the green growth agenda already underway within the European Green Deal (EGD). The EGD is already perfecting the neoliberalization of the European energy sector, spreading infrastructural development and digitalization, which—despite acknowledging the extractive costs (5, 113, 118)—demands a much deeper critical reflection in the book.

The relatively uncritical deployment of a “fossil fuel” versus “renewable energy” dichotomy in *The Case for Degrowth* obstructs a political assessment of the Green New Deal, neglecting how everything operates on hydrocarbons. The EGD Directive, or corresponding legislation, is ignored in *The Case for*

Degrowth, instead the authors rely on reports that speak of a “Green New Deal for Europe” (Ch. 4, endnote 2). NGO proposals are presented as government directives.

Speaking in general terms about the Green New Deal avoids the uncomfortable reality of the neoliberalization schemes it “rolls out” in practice. The book’s advocacy for Green New Deal policies stands in stark contradiction to its rightful criticisms of green growth.

In addition, *The Case for Degrowth* falls short in matters of social change. The political omissions in this book almost entirely betrays the approach of advocating a “plurality of pathways that can thrive in mutual respect” that the authors claim to take. While drawing extensively on anarchist (or Indigenous) inspired ideas of “mutual aid,” horizontal organizing (cooperatives, etc.) and direct action, there is no mention or reference to the Indigenous or anarchist combatants or scholars.

Erasing anarchist praxis from the book, especially since two authors live in Barcelona, raises eyebrows (and in my case, provokes a frown). Is the book mining, watering down and repackaging anarchist ideas or do the authors fear alienating new readers with the “anarchist” label associated with property destruction and sabotage? It is anyone’s guess, but there seems to be a quantitative concern for readership and marketability over quality of political discussion.

More glaring omissions emerge in the discussion of “common modes of production” and housing. “Worldwide, hundreds of eco-communes, transition towns, co-living and co-cohousing communities are learning together and gaining strength,” the book states (57). Why is *squatting* missing here? Arguably, squatting is the preeminent commoning project, seizing private property to create common housing and anti-capitalist spaces. Squatting as a global political movement in every city—with a particularly strong history in Barcelona—or as informal settlements and *favelas* organizing political education and resistance. Squatting offers important common survival and resistance strategies.

Couched in the language of degrowth, Claudio Cattaneo (2013: 139) reminds us that the “autonomous squatting movement” has “practical effects” in “terms of reduced material and energy consumption.” The link between degrowth and squatting is already established, yet the book is silent on this connection.

Furthermore, and especially given the emphasis on localizing, the spectacular and relatively recent *Can Vies* squat resistance is another missed opportunity. In May 2014 the city of Barcelona tried to evict the squatted social center, spawning weeks of rioting and protests that spread to Girona, Madrid and Valencia. People formed a human chain just under a mile long to pass rubble from the demolished part of the squat to the doorstep of the district hall (see Scorsby, 2017). Ignoring *Can Vives*, and squatting in general, is an unacceptable omission that implicitly promotes the sanitizing of commoning struggles.

While anarchism, squatting, permaculture and edible cities were ignored, the “occupy” and “plaza occupation” movement was mentioned positively (92, 107) without discussing the reality of (movement-led) political recuperation and institutionalization of the movement (e.g. SYRIZA; Podemos).

The Case for Degrowth also ignores important analysis of these movements from within these struggles (see: Crimethinc, 2011; Gelderloos, 2013; TIC, 2015). While degrowth as a political strategy remains open and plural—which is a great strength—*The Case for Degrowth* simultaneously treads lightly on political analysis, the influence of the non-profit industrial complex (100), and differentially parades struggles in the so-called global “North” and “South.”

Degrowth scholars are exceptional at demonstrating the global relevance of degrowth, but combative political tactics are implicitly limited to the Zapatistas and “Indigenous communities” fighting against extractive projects (101), while civil disobedience and “the exercise of massive non-violent protest to contest those who use violence to maintain undemocratic and untenable orders” is reserved for Europe (97).

As I have expressed elsewhere (Dunlap, 2020), the same critiques of degrowth from Latin America—“reflecting the values of a particular social group” that is “insufficiently sensitive to their realities and unable to capture the essence of the visions articulated by those who oppose extractivist projects” (Demaria et al., 2019: 439) – also resonate in committed and combative struggles in Europe, from squatting to land defense. In these passages, and especially when lacking citations—the text feels careless, rushed and contradictory.

The Case for Degrowth makes a fundamentally important case, especially in advocating a plurality of struggles. The substance of this position, however, is diminished by the authors’ treatment of the GND, political ideas and struggles. I would still recommend *The Case for Degrowth*, but with the caveat of its silence regarding anarchism and squatting, the possibilities of edible cities, and pathways offered by militant struggle inside Europe.

References

Cattaneo C. (2013) Urban squatting, rural squatting and the ecological-economic perspective. In: Squatting Europe Kollektive (ed) *Squatting in Europe: Radical spaces, urban struggles*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 139-160.

Crimethinc. (2011) *Fire Extinguishers and Fire Starters*. Available at: <https://crimethinc.com/2011/06/08/fire-extinguishers-and-fire-starters-anarchist-interventions-in-the-spanish-revolution-an-account-from-barcelona>.

Demaria F, Kallis G and Bakker K. (2019) Geographies of degrowth: Nowtopias, resurgences and the decolonization of imaginaries and places. *Environment and Planning E* 2(3): 431-450.

Dunlap A. (2020) *Recognizing the "De" in Degrowth*. Undisciplined Environments, Available at: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alexander-dunlap-recognizing-the-de-in-degrowth>.

Gelderloos P. (2013) *The Failure of Nonviolence: From Arab Spring to Occupy*, Seattle: Left Bank Books.

Scorsby C. (2017) *Barcelona's Can Vies social center saved*. Fifth Estate, Available at: <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/398-summer-2017/barcelonas-can-vies-social-center-saved/>.

Rostow W. (1960) *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

TIC (The Invisible Committee). (2015) *To Our Friends*, South Pasadena: Semiotext(e).

About the review author

Alexander Dunlap is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Centre for Development and the Environment, University of Oslo. He has published two books: *Renewing Destruction: Wind Energy Development, Conflict and Resistance in an American Context* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) and, the co-authored, *The Violent Technologies of Extraction* (Palgrave, 2020). Contact: alexander.dunlap AT sum.uio.no