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BOOK REVIEW:

Degrowth: necessary, urgent and good for you

Kallis, G. Paulson, S. D'Alisa G. and Demaria, F. (2020) *The Case for Degrowth.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 151pp. (ppk) ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3563-7. $12.95.

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Introduction

Some introductory context is required for the general reader to make sense of Kallis et al.'s important new book, *The Case for Degrowth* (Kallis et al., 2020). It is now widely recognized that we have entered a period of climate and ecological "emergency" leading to the existential possibility of "ecocide" (e.g. Ripple et al,. 2020; Lenton et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2017; Steffen et al., 2018, 2015). Complacency and delay have been endemic (see Lamb et al., 2020; Oreskes and Conway, 2010). But it is also recognized that fundamental change is required in order to avert disaster (Spash, 2020a; Newall and Taylor, 2020; Fullbrook and Morgan, 2019; Gills and Morgan, 2020a). What we mean by "change", however, has remained in dispute. If we dispense with nuance for the moment, there are broadly three positions, each of which blends into the next based on relative emphasis and matters of degree, albeit with some greater disjuncture for the third position with which this essay is chiefly concerned.

First, there is the historically dominant position that has informed the majority of state discourses, COP negotiation and UNEP "line of least resistance" policy discussion over the past 30 years. This dominant position argues for gradual change based on mainly market led or market conforming processes and induced technological change. Over the years and as evidence of climate change and ecological damage has accumulated, this dominant position has transitioned to a modified variety of "business as usual", which anticipates massive redirection of investment and resources over the course of the century to solve "the climate problem" through "green growth". However, the anticipation is still that this massive redirection will be mainly price signalled and private sector led, with the state providing tax incentives and subsidies, regulation to facilitate change and some degree of "partnership". In this first position, green growth assimilates climate crisis as the latest opportunity for a profit-driven concept of progress.

There is a second position evolving out of the first, which also argues for tax incentives and subsidies, regulation to facilitate change and partnerships, but places greater emphasis on intervention, massive mobilisation of resources and ownership of productive assets by the state as the foundation of a new economy: a "Green New Deal" (GND) program. The concept of a GND is embraced to different degrees by different states, political parties and regional organizations and the term is thus vulnerable to rhetorical use and "greenwash" problems. As such adoption of the language of GND and variations on its policy framework merge into the first or historically dominant position: the EU has been working towards a GND (progressed by the European Council 2019 and by the European Parliament 2020 with an opt-out for

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Poland). Central to GNDs (and this has gained momentum since the Paris agreement) are decarbonisation strategies and targets for net zero GHG emissions by mid-century.[2] GNDs envisage a transformed energy and transport infrastructure based on electrification and renewables, major changes to agribusiness and land management (e.g. extensive tree planting) and a new manufacturing sector harnessing the latest ("fourth industrial revolution") technology to produce within a more "circular economy" for a more ecologically aware consumer, eating differently and living in new or retrofitted lower impact or climate resilient housing stock.

The more radical varieties of the second position are more critical of the historically dominant position. Advocates criticise the historically dominant position for its delays, complacency, and debilitating compromises and willingness to just keep talking whilst problems mount. The critique suggests the dominant approach does not go far enough, since it places too much emphasis on gradual, spontaneous and voluntary change – which, despite dominant position claims to the contrary, underplays the urgency and severity of the problems at hand, neglects the broader ecological issues that have arisen conjointly with the most high profile issue of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and most crucially, underplays *the role of corporate vested interests in creating delay and the potential role of the state* as a mobiliser of resources. It is this last feature that is central to the more radical versions of GNDs. Whilst the more conservative end of the first position associates green growth opportunity with modified business as usual, serving already existent corporate interests, the more radical variant of GND programs in the second position place great emphasis on climate crisis as an opportunity to address the cumulative pathologies of the last few decades of globalised neoliberalism. The list of pathologies is long: the creation of short-termist economies and societies with greater inequality, lower social and economic mobility, debt dependence, wage stagnation, precarious employment, underinvested public services and numerous fragmentations and socio-political fracture lines (structural racism etc.). The more radical version of the second position then, views climate and ecological "emergency" as an opportunity for renewal based on a greater role for the state and an equitable transition that provides a foundation for a transformed society and economy. Perhaps the best known of this variant is associated with the progressive wing of the Democrats in the USA (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and so forth).

However, there is a third position that is sceptical regarding the framing and adequacy of even the most radical of the progressive variants of the second position. In the last ten years the dominant position has begun to reframe as a "green growth" project and this has remained an explicit feature in much of the planning and justification of GNDs. Even the more radical variants of the second position tend to be vague, inconsistent or vacillating on this subject, at least in so far as they lack clarity on what "growth" means and whether there is evidence that "green growth" is feasible and thus compatible with the overriding goal of ensuring the future of our species. Green growth embraces the concept of growth as both the means to enable ongoing socio-economic transformation and as a consequence of successful

[2] Note: "net" zero versus full decarbonisation has also become an issue. For example, Anderson et al (2020: 2) state: "Paris-compliant carbon budgets for developed countries imply full decarbonisation of energy by 2035-40, necessitating a scale of change in physical infrastructure reminiscent of the post-Second World War Marshall Plan. This brings issues of values, measures of prosperity and socio-economic inequality to the fore. The stringency of Paris-compliant pathways severely limits the opportunity for inter-sectoral emissions trading. Consequently aviation, as with all sectors, will need to identify policies to reduce emissions to zero, directly or through the use of zero carbon fuels."

transformation. The third position – the growth sceptics[3] – share much of the more radical second position's perspective and aspirations, articulated as a "just transition" (for historic context of the concept see Newell and Simms, 2020). But they differ sharply over any implicit or explicit commitment to growth.

Perhaps the most prominent variety of the third position at the moment is the "degrowth" movement. For advocates of degrowth (as it is for other sceptics – see later) a growth system is *the* fundamental problem not an intrinsic aspect of solutions. Kallis et al. (2020) then, are as the title of their book suggests, making *The Case for Degrowth.* The subject is perhaps the most significant of our time and Kallis et al.'s contribution deserves to be widely read.

Before setting out the book's main argument and structure, since there are numerous misunderstandings, it is worth elaborating on what degrowth in general "is" – this draws partly on the book's first two chapters and appended "frequently asked questions" (Kallis et al., 2020: 1-42, 110-129) and other relevant sources (see e.g. Chertkovskya et al., 2019; Gerber, 2020; Hickel, 2020a; 2020b; 2019; Liegey and Nelson, 2020; Kallis, 2019; Kallis, 2018a, 2018b; 2011; D'Alisa et al., 2015; Demaria et al., 2013).

What is degrowth?

Advocates of degrowth distinguish *material* growth from *economic* growth. Material growth is the increasing use of matter and energy by societies, whilst economic growth is the increasing measured value (in exchange) of economic activity – typically measured as percentage change in GDP per year (for individual countries, but also as published regional and global statistics from the World Bank, IMF etc.). It is the form, scale and intensity of material activity that is responsible for adverse climate and ecological effects and it is continual material growth that pushes against planetary limits and exacerbates cumulative effects. It is material growth, therefore, that must ultimately be halted and reversed in order to address climate and ecological problems. However, though economic growth is distinguishable from material growth, a real economy is not an immaterial set of exchange values, it is a set of material processes undertaken to produce goods and provide services. One of the major flaws in mainstream economics is that measurement of material processes is not foundational to economic analysis. "Ecological economics", by contrast, starts from the premise that an economy is a material process and this involves thermodynamic consequences, entropy, waste creation, and basic bio-physical modification of the world – oriented on "throughput", "metabolic flow" etc. Advocates of degrowth then, tend to embrace an ecological economics position, albeit one must recognise that ecological economics encompasses a range of views (Spash, 2017); degrowth advocates, however, are *not* or not only ecological economists, though if they are they tend to constitute the more activist end of ecological economics and their position does not reduce merely to economics. As such, degrowth shares some concerns with (again with differences) social ecological economics (see Spash, 2020b) and there are also different terminologies with overlap – such as "postgrowth" (Koch, 2020; Buch-Hansen, 2018; Buchs and Koch, 2019; 2017).

[3] Though it may be more accurate to use the term growth realists in so far as they recognize we continue to act as though we had choices that are not really open to us (in so far as one can ever say anything concrete about the future). Perhaps the most prominent name associated with the critique of growthism over the years is Herman Daly (e.g. Daly 2015).

In any case, advocates of degrowth highlight that material growth and economic growth are analytically different but are in reality closely associated. Bigger economies measured by exchange value are greater users of matter and energy.[4] As such, advocates of degrowth argue that "dematerialisation" and "decoupling" are not supported by the evidence – there may be some relative reduction in matter and energy use per $GDP using some measures, but the overall tendency is for matter and energy use to grow as economies grow (Hickel and Kallis, 2019) and for carbon emissions to grow;[5] moreover, as economies grow then the scale of associated problems that must somehow be mitigated by innovation and technology likewise grows,[6] and whilst a more "circular economy" is desirable, a fully circular economy is thermodynamically impossible (akin to a perpetual motion machine) and cannot make observed *ever-expanding* land, sea and resource use feasible on a finite planet.[7] An economy is a subsystem operating within, yet capable of detrimentally impacting upon, basic earth-system dynamics.

So, for advocates of degrowth the scale and intensity of material activity associated with economies are *already* too great on a planetary level and must be reduced to sustainable levels. Clearly, in a world of inequality within countries and inequality between countries (one of "uneven development") this immediately invites questions regarding where and what to reduce, and we will return to this below. What needs to be emphasised first (for clarity) is that advocates of degrowth place great emphasis on the generalised commitment to growth – "growthism" – as *the* foundational problem of contemporary socio-economies. In *The Case for Degrowth*, for example, Kallis et al introduce the simple and arresting observation that a system predicated on continual economic (and thus material) growth targets a percentage increase in the economy *every* year and whilst the percentage may seem small to a member of the public the compounding effect is significant: 3% per year doubles an economy every 24 years, quadruples it every 48 years and increases it 16 fold over a century (Kallis et al., 2020: 12-13, 24-25). Moreover, this expansionary drive is not confined to one country, but rather propagated from one country to the next as industrialised-consumption economies spread and evolve.

The main target of the growthist critique is actually existing economies and so the main target is what we typically refer to as capitalist economy. To be clear, the degrowth critique is not incompatible with discussion of nuance related to "varieties of capitalism", the "developmental state" etc. nor does it simply assume a command economy is preferable to a market one, if

[4]The UN International Resource Panel Global Materials Flow Database (1970-2017) provides extensive evidence that establishes that global material use remains high:
https://www.resourcepanel.org/global-material-flows-database
On "material flows" see also Wiedmann et al 2015.

[5] As Fletcher and Rammelt note (2017: 451), the decoupling concept was introduced by the OECD in 2001, initially assimilated by the UNEP via its International Resource Panel in 2007 and widely disseminated through the UNEP in 2011 via the report *Decoupling natural resource use and environmental impacts from economic growth* (as a precursor to Rio+20 in 2012). For data contesting various aspects of decoupling see Keen 2020; Schröder and Storm 2020; Parrique et al. 2019.

[6] The range of ecologically destructive activity includes patterns of: intensive agriculture, industrial scale fishing, industrial scale extraction of minerals, gas and oil, growing global energy demand, global vehicle ownership and manufacturing output as well as continual waste disposal for plastics, pesticides, cosmetics, fertilizers, food waste, heavy metals, and medicines.

[7] See analysis from the IPCC (2019a and 2019b). For example, agricultural land use is a major cause of emissions and climate change. Human use directly affects about 70% of the ice-free land surface; agriculture accounts for 70% of freshwater use; since 1961 per capita supply of meat and vegetable oils has doubled, 2 billion people are overweight (compared to 821 million undernourished) and 25-30% of total food produced is wasted; dryland (desertification) area has increased by average 1% per year since 1961.

continuous growth is the basis of that system.[8] The overriding issue is that a growth system is deeply problematic because it necessarily comes up against real limits imposed by the world (confirmed by climatologists, earth system scientists etc; see Ripple et al., 2020; Lenton et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2017; Steffen et al., 2018; 2015).[9] However, advocates of degrowth also argue that a growth system is historically aberrational – a dangerous or reckless *exception* to how we have lived previously (and some still live today) – but an exception that has successfully been naturalised, and the main focus here is capitalist market economy, since this is most prevalent.[10] Advocates of degrowth emphasise that the idea of growth has become a kind of worldview or socialised "common sense" that works to obscure the implications of pursuing perpetual growth. Ideologically, we are encouraged to associate growth with progress and to think of growth as the basis of innovation, technological change, improved livelihoods and more choice, despite that none of these features *necessarily* require continual material expansion – and especially on a planetary level. Furthermore, degrowth advocates tend to argue that for the kinds of real economies that dominate, the absence of economic growth is not a designed "steady state". The absence of economic growth is not stable – it is stagnation, recession depression and crisis. As such, advocates of degrowth point out that our economies are predicated on *stability as growth,* which is a profoundly unstable dynamic.

From a degrowth perspective, various factors have come together to reproduce growthism as "common sense" – corporations in competition (even though they may be suppressing competition as they expand), employment creation through proliferation (e.g. planned obsolescence), populations encouraged to consume for identity purposes, governments focused on GDP metrics, and a whole set of information, persuasion and knowledge producing disciplines and practices that valorise the system as is and implicitly or explicitly associate continual growth and progress – naturalising the unnatural or exceptional and obscuring the fundamental problem of limits. In this context, mainstream economics plays a prominent role as a source of concepts and theory, of policy and of education.[11] Advocates of degrowth, by contrast, as well as embracing (with caveats) ecological economics, tend also to advocate a more social and conditional idea of an economy based on "provisioning". Andrew Sayer (in a different context than degrowth) summarises this perspective as:

[8] Though the transition from socialist command economy to capitalist mixed economy (with highly specific characteristics in China's case) is itself problematic, as growth sceptic Richard Smith argues (see e.g. Smith 2016).

[9] And for statement on cumulative failure of emissions policy see UNEP emissions gap analysis. For example, UNEP, 2019; Christensen and Olhoff, 2019. Note also that argument that suggests there have been previous periods of rapid warming tend to underplay the difference that anthropic interference makes in the modern period (as well as the vulnerability of human civilization). It is true that the end of the Paleocene and beginning of the Eocene 50 million years ago was marked by a rapid rise in atmospheric GHGs and global temperature, with changes occurring over perhaps 1000 years and persisting for around 100,000 years. This did result in widespread extinctions but also rapid evolution. However, our own situation is not equivalent i.e. liable to solve itself, since the causes are not time limited in necessarily reversable systemic transmissions. As Lenton et al. (2020) note, we are either imminently approaching or may have already exceeded 9 critical climate tipping points. This is in the context of problems of: deforestation, water table depletion, eutrophication and rising toxicities in soil and air, desertification, rapid species extinction and general loss of biodiversity on land and sea, disruption and destruction of ecosystems, melting ice sheets, sea level rises, increasingly erratic weather patterns and extreme weather events.

[10] To be clear, degrowth activists are not the only ones to identify growth as historically aberrational and problematic; see Spash 2020a; 2020b; Dale 2012.

[11] For general ecological economics critique see also O'Neill 2007; Söderbaum, 2018; Røpke, 2020; Gills and Morgan, 2020b; Morgan, 2015. For a different perspective see Bacevic (2020).

> "Most basically, we need to remember something that has been forgotten in modern mainstream economics: economics is about *provisioning*. As anthropologists and feminist economists have reminded us, it's about how societies provide themselves with the wherewithal to live. Provisioning requires *work* – producing goods, from food and shelter through to clothes and newspapers, and services, such as teaching, providing advice and information, and care work. Almost all provisioning involves social relations between people, as producers, consumers, owners, lenders, borrowers and so on. It's through these relations that provisioning is organised. Some kinds of provisioning take place through markets; some do not. The market/non-market boundary does not define the edge of the economy: unpaid work [contributes]" (Sayer, 2015: 20-21).

This is a more wide-ranging perspective regarding the purpose of an economy – it avoids immediate reduction that associates markets, wage labor, material-economic growth and progress. A provisioning perspective is more compatible with a needs based, human flourishing and capabilities approach to an economy. It opens up a more conditional and qualitative set of questions or inquiries focused on how and what we provision and this contrasts with the inversion that underpins contemporary economy (the economy becomes the monster we feed… and it is written about as an objective entity whose needs must be met even if that involves sacrifice – to mix metaphors, a treadmill where, for example, it becomes patriotic to go out and spend and consume for no other purpose than that the kinds of economies we have created require this). An emphasis on provisioning, of course, is not an exclusively degrowth position anymore than ecological economics and degrowth are the same, but that is not the point. Provisioning is a discursive feature of degrowth.

However, whilst degrowth is increasingly a field of study, it is important to remember that its origins are more political, rooted in social movement critique of capitalism and the exploitations of capitalist developmental policy. The term degrowth thus has a history, as Liegey and Nelson note:

> "[It is in the] context of heightened debate and widespread dismay that the degrowth movement sprang to life in Europe and spread further afield. The term '*décroissance*', later translated into 'degrowth' in English, began as a provocative slogan used by activists in the early 2000s. The French political scientist and editor Paul Ariès has referred to degrowth as a 'missile word', intentionally making people question the "growth is good and more growth better" flag under which all nations seemed to have united in economic terms. In strict translations of '*décroissance*', going beyond growth means reducing or decreasing. Proponents focus on reducing environmental use and abuse, yet degrowth is, at once, both a qualitative and a quantitative concept. The qualitative dimension is captured in concepts such as "frugal abundance", which connects 'conviviality' – enjoying one another's company and acting in solidarity – with valuing the richness of simplicity as in 'small is beautiful'. Beyond significant misunderstandings arising externally, degrowth has developed multiple meanings and nuances within the activist movement campaigning for it. Most significantly, the word 'degrowth' has misled to the extent that its prefix and association with words such as *de*cline and *di*minish seem to indicate that *de*growth means austerity, puritanism and even poverty. The minimalist simple-living aspect of degrowth seems to confirm such

> suspicions. Especially since the global financial crisis broke during 2007–8, with persisting consequences, degrowth sounds unsettling. In contrast, degrowth theorists and activists see degrowth as establishing secure and safe lives, fulfilling everyone's needs in collaborative and collective ways, as celebratory and convivial. The degrowth principle of living within Earth's regenerative limits in socially equitable and collectively supportive ways addresses both global and environmental crises" (Liegey and Nelson 2020: 2-3).[12]

So, whilst degrowth advocates tend to question the naturalisation of growth and objectification of an economy as though we had no alternative, they do highlight the structural conditions that lead to exploitation in the name of progress. For example, Gerber states:

> "The ideology of growth – or growthism – is at the core of capitalism. Growthism sustains capitalism politically because it allows avoiding redistribution by giving the impression that everyone will continually benefit from it. Growthism pacifies class struggle while justifying existing structures of inequality… In the West, growth was instrumental to diffuse demands of the workers' movement, in the East, to excuse the lack of democracy and worker control, and in the South, to justify dispossession and extractivism. Today, GDP growth remains the key stabilising mechanism of capitalist economies" (Gerber 2020: 237).[13]

And degrowth advocates emphasise that "growthism" depoliticizes key issues in a neoliberal context. According to Demaria et al., degrowth is about re-politicisation:

> "The contemporary context of neo-liberal capitalism appears as a post-political condition, meaning a political formation that forecloses the political and prevents the politicisation of particular demands. Within this context, degrowth is an attempt to re-politicise the debate on the much needed socio-ecological transformation, affirming dissidence with the current world representations and searching for alternative ones. Along these lines,

[12] As Demaria et al. (2013) note and Gerber (2020) summarises: "There are four immediate sources to the modern notion of degrowth: first, the radical western environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s, with two famous women in particular, Rachel Carson who wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962 and Donella Meadows who coordinated *The Limits to Growth* report in 1972; second, the political, cultural and existential critique of capitalist modernity, as in the works of Erich Fromm and Cornelius Castoriadis; third, the heterodox current of ecological economics, and particularly the work of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen…; and fourth, the critique of 'development' seen not as a liberation process but as the continuation of western capitalist hegemony, with the works of Arturo Escobar or Ivan Illich." (Gerber, 2020: 238)

[13] Again, this is an argument broadly shared by other growth sceptics. For example, Spash, 2020a: "The globalisation of this capitalist form of economic structure means domination of resource rich regions for extraction, control of ecosystems for productivist ends (goods and services) and social dependency on monetary flows. Within countries resource extraction wins over indigenous peoples' rights and Nature. This is the case in both the global South and North. German brown coal (lignite) extraction has destroyed much of the remnant of ancient Hambach forest while also evicting residents and destroying whole towns. Native Americans in Canada have suffered from tar sands extraction and in the USA lost against fossil fuels interests building oil and gas pipelines (e.g. Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline). Alternative economies and ways of social provisioning by indigenous communities are typically regarded as backward and unprogressive and their values derided. The economic rhetoric is about production, consumption, competition, innovation and government operating to support growth in corporate profits."

> degrowth is a critique of the current development hegemony" (Demaria et al., 2013: 192).

This emphasis on systemic critique of the ideology of growth contrasts sharply with mainstream economics. Mainstream economics is an anodyne tale of growth expressed as dynamic efficiency achieved through markets – framed as an ahistorical concept, *the* "market". A cluster of theories and concepts are deployed to support the position: comparative advantage in trade, total factor productivity growth models and their descendants etc. and perhaps most influentially, the familiar narrative of mutually beneficial "globalization". Advocates of degrowth look at this very differently. If one looks beyond some simple and often misleading metrics (such as Branko Milanovic's "elephant curve"), "development" around the world has been to the detriment of both the environment and much of the population on a state basis (e.g. Hickel, 2018; 2017). The *historical* market and *historical* globalization have depended on exploitation of peoples and places (taking in slavery, imperialism and empire as well as modern corporate practices) – much of this is articulated under the heading of "extractivism" (from natural resources to flows of debt servicing). Moreover, in the contemporary period, the environmental and human costs of trying to keep continuous growth going have been great (everything from plastics in the sea to financialised debt-dependency and the acknowledged post financial crisis vulnerabilities exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic). Degrowth then, is *not* the latest global North (if well-intentioned) demand that the global South sacrifice in order to save the planet and, conveniently, safeguard the greater living standards of the global North (Hickel, 2020a; 2020b; 2019). Degrowth (again, an argument shared by many growth sceptics e.g. O'Neill et al., 2018; Dietz and O'Neill, 2013) makes the case that we can all live differently whilst achieving better livelihoods, and one key strand in this is bringing a halt to exploitative economic relations.

To summarise, degrowth is a subset of the growth sceptic position, which draws on ecological economics for its approach to the materiality of economies, but places this in a more activist context of politicised critique of growthism and "development". It highlights the aberrational nature and adverse consequences of continuous growth as a systemic goal, emphasizes the ideological function of growth and the perpetuated inequalities, harms and exploitations of actually existing economies. The inference drawn by advocates of degrowth is that an end to growthism is not just an ecological and climatological imperative, it is from the point of view of wellbeing, a desirable civilizational change. Hence the title of this essay, "Degrowth: necessary, urgent and good for you". Degrowth then, embraces an ethos of "doing less with less", of "slower by design", but aspires to "high living standards based on lower resource use" – improving rather than sacrificing life expectancies, basic care services and quality of living.[14] Intrinsic to this is controlled lower throughput and the overwhelming likelihood of lower GDP (at least if we use current priorities and ways of measuring value as the benchmark). However, for its advocates degrowth is not just one change, it is many, degrowth looks to historic alternative patterns of living and organization *and* the potentials created by science, technology etc. for inspiration. This brings us to Kallis et al's *The Case for Degrowth* and its main themes.

[14] To labour the point, advocates of degrowth are not the only ones to argue for this and use this language. Julia Steinberger, for example, discussed this at a recent panel bringing together ecological economists and degrowth activists at the September 2020 "Economy and Livelihoods after Covid-19" event, hosted by Manchester University and administered by Mark H. Burton https://www.resilience.org/resilience-author/mark-burton-2/

The Case for degrowth

The first two chapters of *The Case for Degrowth* deal with the issues I have just set out, but do so in a ranging and conversational rather than concise and systematic sense. This is in keeping with the overall purpose of the book, which is to provide an engaging and readable introduction to key themes (the book is published in Polity's "Case for" series and these are all similarly accessible). The underlying purpose of the book, however, is to emphasise the constructive potential of degrowth (why we might prefer different ways of living) and the many practical policies and changes to how we live that can be turned to its primary goals (since many changes do not necessitate degrowth but are claimed to be compatible with it). As such, the book is conceived as a working document intended to encourage organising and positivity, rather than dwell on the many problems that are the reasons why degrowth is now of interest (for reading and comment on that see the previous section). This, of course, makes the book a discursive (in the Gramscian sense of "war of position") counter to the grip the ideology of growthism has on contemporary thinking, a point intrinsic to the opening statement of Chapter Three, "Narratives that dominate contemporary life make it easier to imagine the end of the world, even the end of capitalism, than the end of growth" (Kallis et al., 2020: 44), as well as the main material of the chapter and the next, which explore how degrowth can be built from the "ground up". Statements from the final chapter reinforce the point:

> "[I]n relation to other scenarios on the horizon, we are convinced that degrowth is a more humane and equitable path forward… [But] You still might not be convinced that a politics of degrowth is feasible. We have our doubts too… [Still] There is no technological or policy fix that can generalize to nine billion people the material standard of living currently enjoyed by a minority at high cost to others… [and] The most immediate case for degrowth that we try to communicate in this book is that a modest life based on cooperation and sharing is desirable in and of itself… The case for degrowth is not about martyred self-denial or constraining human potential; it is about reorienting socio-economies to support collaborative and creative construction of lives that are pleasurable, healthy, satisfying and sustainable for more people and more places" (Kallis et al.: 106 and 108-109)

The authors emphasise that it is important to avoid self-righteous climate "purist" accusations of "hypocrisy", since this may inadvertently lead to reactionary reinforcement of the status quo i.e. demanding all actions are fully consistent may paralyse progress: "Short of abandoning everything to live in a cave, none of us can try out options without contradicting existing lifestyles designed to facilitate growth" (Kallis et al. 2020: 49). Chapter Three makes several main points:

- "Taking personal action is a first step toward building societies that implement needed changes in policies and institutions," (Kallis et al., 2020: 51). However:
- Some options may not be initially available or widely available, but changes initiated by a few can create grounds for changes for the many, either by local organic adoption or by cumulative change, which places pressure on authorities to respond through changes to regulation, planning, finance and resource priorities. So, local communal cooperative initiatives affect land use and attitudes (cultivating garden

spaces for food, distributing locally, organising access and localised transport options, such as cycleways etc; Kallis et al., 2020: 53).[15] These initiatives can:

- Coevolve as an increasingly co-ordinated set of mutually supportive changes (a degrowth conducive community ecosystem). For example, the creation of credit unions, adoption of local currencies that can be exchanged locally for goods and services, which, in turn, can broaden the scope for small scale employment opportunities that can be specifically focused on identified local need.

In this way more of the sum of activity can be focused on local scale provisioning, meaning that a wider range of things that matter to people are actualised – care and community and so forth. Clearly, none of this is particularly original. Much of it is familiar from anarcho-syndicalism and similar community-oriented projects. But originality is not the point – plausibility and persuasion are the intention. For advocates of degrowth there are immediate and feasible (hence realistic) options that start to shift the balance from private propertied activity overwhelmingly focused on profit, to "commons" activity that foregrounds collective wellbeing and support. It is perhaps also worth noting (though Kallis et al do not) that according to the International Co-operative Alliance in September 2020:[16]

- More than 12% of humanity are part of the 3 million cooperatives in the world.
- The largest 300 cooperatives and mutuals report a total turnover of 2,034.98 billion USD, according to the World Cooperative Monitor (2019).
- Cooperatives contribute to the sustainable economic growth and stable, quality employment, employing 280 million people across the globe, in other words, 10% of the world's employed population.

As the statement suggests, cooperatives are not by definition degrowth, nor are they necessarily all unequivocally oriented on climate and ecologically beneficial activity. But as Kallis et al. argue, whilst cooperatives, commons &c activities are not necessarily degrowth-focused, they are, arguably, far more conducive to its concerns and realisation.[17] Many initiatives produce less negative socio-ecological impacts (lower material and energy use etc.) because they are intrinsically slower by design, localised, and focused on quality of living. Moreover, whilst such activity is radically different from the ideological core of capitalist market economy and may be absent in some places, it is *not* totally new.[18] Though advocates

[15] A suggestion compatible with the concept of the "15 minute city".
[16] https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/facts-and-figures
[17] Degrowth then, is definitely critical of contemporary capitalism, but it is more questionable whether it is necessarily anti-capitalist. Clearly, many adherents are liable to be anti-capitalist, but whether in fact the *implication* of degrowth is fundamentally contra-capitalism depends on whether a hybrid system with smaller scale capitalist relations and a steady state focus is possible (and this seems to be something of an open question in degrowth circles). For example, advocates of degrowth sometimes argue the question is moot – "capitalism as it currently is seems incompatible and it is this with which we must contend to solve the climate crisis" – what evolves from this will depend on how solutions develop and thus on what emerges – solving the problems seems more important than worrying about what we call this. This, of course, is a reasonable response, but not a theory articulated answer. There is also an organising imperative here – do degrowth advocates want to alienate potential allies (an issue currently plaguing Extinction Rebellion, which is experiencing a concerted media campaign to delegitimise them based on the "fellow traveller" and co-option-subversion by "sinister forces" accusation)? See conclusion.
[18] "[G]lobalization of one monoculture based on selfish competition seems to have undermined myriad forms of mutual aid that have propelled social evolution throughout history." (Kallis et al., 2020: 55). However, one should not romanticise established or past practices just because they are community-oriented (they may still be hostile exclusionary, oppressive to members, racist sexist and classist… (Kallis et al., 2020: 60-1)

argue that the intention is to create cross-fertilising cumulative effects (self-sustaining community ecosystems) the types of projects and activities engaged in do not need to be invented anew every time. There are actually existing examples that are already working somewhere in the world (reinforcing the point that how people live does not and need not necessarily coincide with the archetype of the capitalist individuated consumer primed to participate in a growth system). The book highlights many examples that can be drawn on. Since several of the authors live and work in Barcelona the book pays particular attention to the Catalan cooperative movement, but also highlights Latin American agroecology organizations, traditional community activity and the possibilities created by new technology: Farmhack, Wikihouse, OpenBionics, RepRep etc. The book notes examples rather than explores any in detail and is intended to be illustrative rather than comprehensive (and there are numerous other contexts, practices, problems and discussions around the world one might refer to; see, for example, on degrowth, Lockyer, 2017; Nirmal et al., 2019; and more generally, Schiffer, 2020a; 2020b; Schiffer et al., 2019).

The authors are also clear that they do not expect to solve all problems with these localised community changes.[19] The point is to begin to realise changes where communities "rather than addressing grievances to distant power-holders, they become participants in building conditions in which they want to live" (Kallis et al., 2020: 63). This is not instead of political pressure at greater scales, but in conjunction with it. The main material set out in Chapters Three and Four is oriented by the perspective that systemic change can be based on multiple, incremental and experimental changes that shift the balance of activity within currently existing societies, providing exemplars and momentum for transformation of those societies. Activity can be personal, communal and more traditionally macro-political (advocating and working for changes at *all* scales). Chapter Four sets out five "policy packages" that collectively facilitate "path-breaking" reform:[20]

1. Green New Deal programs (GNDs): advocates of degrowth add the caveat that these must abandon GDP growth as a primary goal, ensure that GNDs are consistent with material activity measures (a "less with less" approach) and ought to place emphasis on decent wages and conditions, since this is one way to achieve a more general possibility of:
2. Reduced working hours per worker: a goal that recognises that stagnating wages, reduced collective rights, enduring precarious conditions and periodic austerity and crisis lead to longer working hours in ostensibly wealthy countries, which reduces the potential for populations to work less and differently; moreover, much of current work is not needs based in a social provisioning sense, it is administration for administration's sake, planned obsolescence and overproduction for superfluous consumption. Fewer working hours per person allows more employment without necessarily more output in a context where "The less we work, the less we produce and consume, and the more time we have for non-monetized activities – including leisure, caring and community engagement – that help to establish healthy and resilient societies" (Kallis et al., 2020: 77). Furthermore, there is scope to assimilate Artificial Intelligence, automation etc. beneficially, *if* the socio-economic context of these does not reduce to competitive displacement, but rather liberates people from

[19] They ask the question: "Are we proposing to feed [a future] nine billion people with urban gardens, lodge everyone in co-housing and raise the world's children in neighbourhood circles?" (Kallis et al., 2020: 58) and reply "no".
[20] NB: I have reordered the five to facilitate concise linking of content and claims.

work.[21] This, in turn, may create scope for and depend to some degree on the development of:

3. Commons prioritising government policy: instead of (only) facilitating traditional marketised commerce and business, government could do more to encourage the community ecosystems set out in Chapter Three (the previously suggested scope for changes to regulation, planning, finance and resource priorities of government – subsidies, tax breaks, seed capital, resource transfer, contract prioritisations etc).[22] Both reduced working hours and preference for "commoning" can be supported by (which can be included in GNDs for the purpose of):
4. The introduction of "universal" mechanisms to support provisioning as alternatives to market mechanisms: Universal Basic Income (UBI), Universal Basic Services (UBS – universal education, healthcare, housing and public transport) and Universal Basic Care (UBC – recognition of the social and economic value of otherwise unpaid activity that is fundamental to any adequately functioning society).[23] This, in turn, can be facilitated by:
5. Reform to public finance: a focus on fiscal priorities and forms of financing that greens and equalizes.

It should be clear that these five are conceived as mutually supportive. The intent is to shift the focus towards livelihoods and quality of life. Public finance is perhaps the critical lever, since what money "is", how money is "created" and what it is created "for" or to "do" are core issues that divide economics in terms of theory and in terms of practical possibility. The authors do not give any detail here, but it is worth noting that radical GND proposals are supported by proponents of Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) and variants of "post Keynesian" finance. These reject the mainstream loanable funds theory of money and finance (see Fullbrook and Morgan 2020). The authors of *The Case for Degrowth* do, however, make reference to "positive money" in a statement that summarises some financing and spending commitments:

> "Fundamental among these are proposals for changing money systems by limiting the domain of general purpose money, creating positive (or public) money, forbidding private banks to create new money through loans, and supporting community currencies and time-banks. Also basic are policies for the transformation of food systems to reduce waste, transitions away from meat-heavy diets, and the promotion of agroecology and community-supported agriculture" (Kallis et al., 2020: 82).[24]

And, of course, there are various matching statements regarding what the authors wish to *prevent* through policy, notably they advocate a moratorium on new fossil fuel development, a ban on fossil fuel advertising, and a phase out of fossil fuel production, matched to "just

[21] For background see Morgan (2019).
[22] Focusing especially on sanitation, health and social care and education and housing. Also including, for example, the strategic use of government procurement options and also anchor institutions such as universities, as well as investment in public buildings and social housing.
[23] As the authors' note, UBI could be provided to OECD country adults set at 15-22.5% of average per capita income funded by moderate tax increase to richest 10-15% plus benefit reductions replaced by UBI; according to London University Global Prosperity Institute, UBS provision of housing, food, internet and transport would require 2.3% of UK GDP.
[24] For some discussion of positive money and ecological issues etc. see Barmes and Boait (2020) and Mark H. Burton's response: https://steadystatemanchester.net/2020/06/30/taking-the-imperative-out-of-growth/

transition" policies.[25] Finally, this brings us to the authors views on strategy in Chapter Five. Here the book draws on Erik Olin Wright's 3 strategies of transformation: "interstitial" (building alternatives *within* the current system as opportunity allows); "symbiotic" (working *with* available systems to reform them) and "ruptural" (working *against* and thus disrupting dominant systems). It should be clear that these follow from and support the general direction of travel advocated by the authors: multiple, incremental, cumulative change with the goal of creating momentum for socio-economic transformation (essentially a tipping point approach).

Conclusion

No single work can possibly make *the* case for degrowth and *The Case* as a book is more by way of a preliminary "a case", but is no less important for that. Kallis et al. do however succeed in presenting an accessible argument that achieves two important things. First, as with much of the degrowth literature (and growth sceptic literature in general) it brings to the fore just how aberrational our idea of normal is. *Continual growth* (as we currently conceive of this) as the systemic "normal" is *abnormal*, our "common sense" is *insane*. The truth of this hides in plain sight and it is an uncomfortable truth.[26] As such, *The Case for Degrowth* provides a useful campaigning text for groups like Extinction Rebellion or Stay Grounded.[27] Second, the book is a timely reminder, as the Covid-19 pandemic diffuses around the world with likely terrible social, economic and human cost, that there is a positive case for degrowth, not just a climate and ecological imperative. As such, *The Case for Degrowth* (noting its pandemic focused Preface) might usefully be read in conjunction with Jason Hickel's recent paper summarising the difference between crisis/recession and degrowth. As he suggests:

> "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 without growth" (Hickel, 2020a: 4).

He highlights 6 related contrasts (Hickel, 2020a: 4):

1. Recessions are unintended, degrowth concerns planned, coherent policy.
2. Degrowth targets less necessary and more harmful economic activity, recessions do not.
3. Recessions create unemployment and damage livelihoods, degrowth redirects resources and seeks just transitions, whilst generally focusing on improved livelihoods.
4. Recessions tend to exacerbate inequality (wealth and income), whilst degrowth seeks to reduce inequality, sharing national and global income more fairly.
5. Recessions typically lead to austerity in which public goods and services suffer, degrowth looks to "decommodify" foundational goods.

[25] All issues compatible with addressing inequality and achieving Paris Agreement goals (see Cabello and Gilbertson, 2015; Morgan, 2017; 2016).
[26] There are many persons and groups undertaking parallel research or involved in campaigns and activism directed at the fundamental issues. For example, Anderson and Goodman (2020); Anderson and Shuttleworth (2020); Ganguly et al (2018); Dale (2020); Brand-Correa and Steinberger (2017).
[27] Stay Grounded campaign to reduce the aviation sector and "build a climate-just transport system" https://stay-grounded.org. See, for example, Smith (2019). On issues of electric transport see Morgan (2020).

6. Degrowth advocates rapid transition to renewable energy and reversal of ecological breakdown, recession typically cause such policy to be abandoned based on short term overriding concern to "get growth going".

Clearly, degrowth and similar projects may be our best alternative to unplanned socio-economic breakdown as the century progresses. Much of the onus for this change lies with the wealthiest countries, since they are responsible for the vast majority of resource use (either directly in domestic use or indirectly based on outsourced supply chains etc.). This is a subject that advocates of degrowth explore, but the mechanics of this and many of the main issues are not the subject of *The Case for Degrowth.* It is not intended as a detailed programmatic book in that sense. The book does acknowledge there is one world with different lived experiences around that world, but does not develop systematically how degrowth might differ because of that difference based on place and placing i.e. how geography and socio-economic location within systems matter to outcomes, responsibility and scope for alternatives. For inquiring readers there is more to be said here regarding the merits or otherwise of capitalist "development" and again Hickel's work is a good place to start with this subject.[28]

If *The Case* is read as "a case" then it offers an important contribution targeting the interested general reader. There is, however, further comment that might be made regarding what the book is not and this is likely a consequence of its intended readership and focus on the positive. The book is not, strictly, a defence of degrowth if by this we mean a detailed response to possible areas of critique. There are a series of critical questions that remain open issues regarding degrowth as both a movement and a source of theory, which, again, is not to downplay the importance of either the issues or degrowth and by no means suggests advocates of degrowth lack possible responses. Degrowth started as a movement organised around a "missile word" and in making a case necessarily invites comment regarding its theoretical tenets and commitments. As a movement it faces the standard problem of strategic communicative efficacy – the persistent problem of misinterpretation of "degrowth" based on ordinary language expectations in societies primed for economic growth (whether this can "backfire", see Drews and Antal 2016; but consider Lackoff 2010). This, however, invites the equally standard counter that changing the terminology dilutes the impact (a problem that has been particularly notable in terms of climate and ecological breakdown – the mainstream choice to refer to climate crisis using the less alarming term "global warming", the preference for "doughnut" metaphors etc. – as Clive Spash notes, "Presumably opposing the nasty side of humanity – slavery, violence, torture, rape, pollution – should never be conducted in oppositional terms (e.g. against, anti, non) for fear of empowering the perpetrators?" (Spash, 2018: 215)).

Moreover, one might reasonably describe degrowth as still a work in progress, an evolving coalition. This notwithstanding, there can still be differences regarding prognosis and what should be done. Ted Trainer, for example, shares much of the community ecology approach to change, but in conjunction with the "Simpler Way" project (Trainer, 2020a; 2019), he is notably more downbeat regarding the feasibility of macro-political pressure, given the urgency of the situation and the structural forces arrayed against major change (Trainer, 2020b). The nature of structure may also be an area of dispute. Advocates of degrowth clearly acknowledge that the structures of capitalism matter, but this is not quite the same as an agreed structurally-informed theory. Is growth *necessary* to capitalism? Is it an internal

[28] And for argument regarding the "environmental state" see Koch (2020).

relational consequence or merely a conditional or contingent consequence? In either case, is growth caused by dynamics or needs of financing systems or by competitive production imperatives or by both? Such questions may seem relatively esoteric, but each bears on underlying questions regarding causation, consequences and transformations. Each ultimately matters for the adequacy of explanation and thus for where and how policy pressure is most adequately applied. There is no single position on these matters within degrowth circles and perhaps this is a strength of the movement. Equally, however, claims of vibrant diversity and pluralism can invite counter criticism to the effect that diversity is eclecticism that dissolves into incoherence (even if the practical policy focus seems to cohere; though Kallis does address some of these issues of theory and capitalism in a more sustained way in Kallis 2018a and 2018b).[29] Where one sits on this is, to some degree, determined by one's approach to what the world is and what it allows for (how relativistic we are about people and their place in the world and the knowledge they have and apply). This "ontological" issue is, for understandable reasons of urgency and of focus on practical matters, not necessarily an immediate concern for the majority of advocates of degrowth, but is, nonetheless, of theoretical interest and of interest because it bears on adequacy of theory. Still, it would be to do a disservice to the work of Kallis et al. and the many other advocates of degrowth to conclude with seemingly negative comment regarding a work intended to highlight the positive. *The Case for Degrowth* provides an important antidote to the more technocratic version of optimism to be found in mainstream circles and should be widely read.[30]

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[29] At the most general level it seems unlikely that a system of capital accumulation, whatever term we use for it, is compatible with the combined goals inherent to degrowth (see Spash 2020c).

[30] There is, for example, something curiously desperate about the growing interest in geo-engineering and technological "solutions" to climate change and it is odd that these are considered "future science" whilst degrowth is dismissed as pejoratively utopic (despite that it involves demonstrable and currently practical solutions, and noting that advocates of degrowth also use the term utopia in the social science sense of realisable or concrete utopia). For a sense of the general direction of travel of techno-optimism see Klaus Lackner's Centre for Negative Carbon Emissions, which is developing "artificial trees" – essentially carbon absorption units for "carbon farming". See https://cnce.engineering.asu.edu.

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