

DEGROWTH BUT, WHERE?

It is almost impossible to disagree with a proposal seeking to slow things down to minimize harm to the planet. However, the question is where. The manifesto in *The Case for Degrowth* acknowledges the challenge of asking distinct populations to lower their economic growth and well-being. They suggest alliances, echoing the commons, and highlight ancient cultural traditions that have envisioned other worlds. In contrast, the discussion offered by Deepak Lamba-Nieves through the case of Puerto Rico and its colonial subjugation – shared or equivalent to many in the Global South and elsewhere – asks us to reflect upon who is demanding or expecting us to degrowth.

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Giorgos Kallis

[<georgios.kallis@uab.cat>](mailto:georgios.kallis@uab.cat)

Bachelor in Chemistry and Master in Environmental Engineering, Imperial College. PhD in Environmental Policy, University of the Aegean. Master in Economics, Barcelona Graduate School of Economics. He is an ecological economist and political ecologist working on environmental justice and limits to growth. He is an ICREA professor since 2010.

Susan Paulson

[<spaulson@latam.ufl.edu>](mailto:spaulson@latam.ufl.edu)

MA and PhD in Anthropology, University of Chicago. Paulson's scholarship explores theoretical frontiers in political ecology and degrowth, and approaches gender and environment with attention to masculinities and intersectionality. She is a professor at the Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida.

THE CASE FOR DEGROWTH¹

Alliance-Building

In this daunting political environment, alliances are fundamental. Millions of potential allies can be found among nature-lovers, care-providers, families with children, biking fanatics, vegans, overworked professionals, hippies, unemployed people, indebted families, climate refugees, back-to-the-landers, senior citizens, people engaged in anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements, and more. Here we look at a few among many vital allies: workers, feminists, anti-racists, and members of low-income communities.

[...] Why would billions of people living in low-income communities and countries support a movement that seems to hinder hopes of enjoying some of the promised benefits of economic growth? First, we must recognize the extremely different conditions and positions among these populations. To many living on frontiers of global expansion, the contraction of European or North American economies can bring relief. Indigenous communities we have worked with in Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, and Ecuador risk their lives fighting against incursions of mining, logging, drilling, roads, and agribusiness, in defense of long-evolving solidarity and kin economies.

Degrowth may seem less appealing to urban middle classes and political leaders in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere, who are trying to improve standards of living and pay off debts with the pittance they obtain from extractivist concessions, taxes on multinational corporations, and similar. Not to mention China, where generations who had suffered deprivation are now caught up in economic and material growth at scales unprecedented in human history.

Our case illuminates ways in which the drive for growth has shaped colonialism, sexism, racism, and other inequities; but we do not argue that our proposals for degrowth are relevant for all actors positioned in the

resulting uneven terrains. Operating from positions in wealthy northern societies, we seek to learn with and from others. Drawing on feminist and decolonial approaches to support mobilization less influenced by historical hierarchies, Dengler and Seebacher (2019:247) argue that

[...] degrowth is not to be misunderstood as proposal from the Global North imposed on the Global South, but rather a Northern supplement to Southern concepts, movements and lines of thought. It is therefore imperative for degrowth to seek alliances with these Southern 'fellow travelers'.

Arturo Escobar (2015:451) identifies points of convergence among moves toward degrowth in the north and toward post-development in Latin America: originating from different intellectual traditions and operating through different epistemic and political practices, they combine radical questioning of core assumptions of growth and economism with visions of alternative worlds based on ecological integrity and social justice.

Those in other parts of the world who are fighting on their own terms for meaningful, equitable, and ecologically sustainable worlds should know that we are engaged in a parallel fight, in the belly of the beast. Even sincere commitments to dialogue and alliance across these differences meet obstacles (Beling, et al., 2017). In interviews with environmental justice activists, Beatriz Rodríguez-Labajos (et al., 2019:176) and colleagues found that "In parts of Africa, Latin America and many other regions of the Global South, including poor and marginalised communities in Northern countries, the term degrowth is not appealing, and does not match people's demands." Susan Paulson (2019) has identified rewards, as well as challenges, of dialogue across difference during a multi-year collaboration

among researchers from varied cultural, linguistic, and national backgrounds learning from communities around the world who prioritize wellbeing and solidarity, rather than increased production and consumption. In our experience, common senses of degrowth, rather than the word itself, do resonate with people living in diverse low-income contexts.

In sum, degrowth visions and proposals draw from and take root among ideas and practices of people in many positions, including long-established religious or spiritual beliefs and everyday life in low-income communities. Rather than replace traditions of worker's struggles or modern development with a new universalizing path, we learn from allies like the Global Tapestry of Alternatives to support conditions in which a plurality of pathways can thrive in mutual respect, reflecting the Zapatista dream of "a world where many worlds fit."² **ARQ**

NOTES

1. Excerpt originally published in Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D'Alisa Federico Demaria, *The Case for Degrowth* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020): 97-104.
2. See the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA): <<https://globaltapestry-ofalternatives.org/>>

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Federico Demaria

<federico.demaria@ub.edu>

BA in Political Economy, MSc in Environmental Studies (Ecological Economics), and PhD in Ecological Economics and Political Ecology. He is an assistant professor at the University of Barcelona, and an associate researcher at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA), Autonomous University of Barcelona.

Giacomo D'Alisa

<giacomodalisa@ces.uc.pt>

PhD in Economics and Technology for Sustainable Development, 2010. He currently is a political ecologist at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, and researches a new understanding of the commons and alternative commons-based resource management suitable for low-carbon societies that prosper without growing.