

**SUSTAINABILITY AND ECONOMIC
ANTHROPOLOGY:
THE DEGROWTH PROJECT**



HANGMAN

_____ in GDP leads to higher welfare



_____ as proxy for utility



Goals for countries: _____

WHAT ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY CAN TEACH US

- Economic anthropology draws attention to the diversity of exchanges and motivations for exchange existing across the world (Hann, 2006)
- Ethnographies show that the universalisation of a Western model of utility maximization is very implausible – instead, one must look at the social embeddedness of economies to understand them (restoring culture to market economies! (Appadurai, 2013))
- Hence, a key takeaway from economic anthropology is that *economies are far from universal, and are to be understood as socially embedded.*
- The assumptions we make (growth = utility = happiness) can thus be challenged!

WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY?

- **Scientific** (response to the climate crisis)
- **Economic** (how does our economy work / how should it work?)
- **Political & social** (organisation of the social order)
- **Ethical** (justice across time and space)
- **Key point:** sustainability is not to be thought independently of **all** of these interdisciplinary fields.
- “The destruction of the biosphere and the forces of oppression, particularly against women, are deeply linked” (Pilgrim & Davis, 2015:124)
- There cannot be a sustainable world without solidarity and justice; creating a better future encompasses all of these different notions (Pilgrim & Davis, 2015).
- Furthermore, this links political goals with scientific research and paradigms. In contemporary philosophy of science, it is widely accepted that science is not independent of social and political values and goals (Lo, 2025).

THE DEGROWTH MOVEMENT

- A scientific, economic, political, social, and ethical movement whose (broad) aim is to counter the master narrative of economic growth, which perpetuates inequalities globally and is contributing to the destruction of the planet.
- Within economic anthropology: debunking the myth of eternal production as the only way to access affluence (Sahlins, 1974); showing the fit of the economy within social organisations (Polanyi, 1944) that may be responsive to people's ideologies and commitments to certain values, rather than essentialised notions of human nature (Hann, 2006).



**THE DEGROWTH
MOVEMENT**

- Policies & clarifications of the movement

DEGROWTH IN PRACTICE: WHAT DOES IT IMPLY?

- What are the policies that degrowth proposes? For what purposes? To what ends?
- The policies proposed by Hickel et al. (2022):
 1. Reduce less-necessary productions (scale down destructive sectors, lengthen objects' lifespans)
 2. Improve public services (universal access to health-care, education, housing, transportation, renewable energy and nutritious food)
 3. Introduce a green jobs guarantee (train and mobilise labour around social and ecological objectives – ensure a just transition out of jobs for workers in declining industries)
 4. Reduce working time (lower retirement age, part-time, four-day working week)

(CONTINUED)

1. Remove dependencies on growth (instead of prioritising short-term financial interests of shareholders, companies should prioritise social and environmental benefits - new macroeconomic models to provide secure funding mechanisms for public providers and better regulation for private providers)
2. Fund public services
3. Manage working-time reductions
4. Reshape provisioning systems (redistribution, etc)

The main goal of the degrowth project: “Generally degrowth challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialised countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being” (Demaria et al., 2013:209)

These policies (reliant on scientific models) would bring this goal to life.

CONCERNS?

Reduced GDP: less investment in technologies, including those necessary for renewable energy? (Van den Bergh, 2011)

-> Many do not see technology as a solution in first place! (Kallis et al., 2018)

Is this movement organized?

Lack of clearly defined policy proposals? (Engler et al, 2024)


Degrowth not in mainstream economics journals (McLaughlin, 2025)

CLARIFICATIONS OF THE DEGROWTH MOVEMENT

- Sometimes, the degrowth movement has been described as a radical, unified movement, with a specifically **ecological** goal.
- This portrayal is overly reductionist and does not represent the pluralism of the degrowth movement, which incorporates a variety of actors such as social activists and academics from different fields, each focusing on different issues within these fields (Demaria et al., 2013).
- Importantly, the pluralism of degrowth is **beneficial** rather than leading to tension or discordance. Degrowth encourages different worldviews and forms of knowledge with the broad aim of countering social and ecological exploitation (Demaria et al., 2013).

THAT BEING SAID...

- Despite the pluralism underlying degrowth, Demaria et al.'s paper emphasises the fact that this does not stop degrowth from having a **common path**.
- The importance of social justice and ecological devastation are paramount in this framework. Furthermore, degrowth explicitly rejects the narrative of ecomodernism as a response to exploitation (of the earth and of people).
- In this next section of class, we will investigate degrowth as a response to ecomodernism.



**DEGROWTH AS A
RESPONSE TO
ECOMODERNISM**

- The debate: will technology save the planet?

ISENHOUR (2016) UNEARTHING HUMAN PROGRESS? ECOMODERNISM AND CONTRASTING DEFINITIONS OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

- Proponents of ecomodernism argue that through technological innovation, climate mitigation does not have to come at the “expense” of the economy – in fact, in order to deal with the climate crisis, we need **more dualism and separation between man and nature. That is, technological advancements will save the planet.**
- This perspective argues that it is man’s reliance on nature that is destroying the planet (evidence: relative decoupling (lowering of emissions correlated with economic growth), improvement of human conditions from technology...)
- Critiques of ecomodernism: no absolute decoupling evidence (overall emissions still up with economic growth), rebound effects, burden shifting.
- In other words, the technological advancements have not completely contributed to lower emissions – rather, burdens have shifted, incentives have changed, but total emissions continue to rise (with further justice issues).
- N.B.: This article shows why looking at the climate crisis independently of justice and power does not make sense!

“ GREEN ECONOMY ” EMBEDDED IN MASTER NARRATIVE OF ECONOMIC GROWTH: AUGUSTYN’S ARGUMENT

- Story of economic growth = master narrative
- Current counter-narratives of “sharing”, “thriftig”, are not real alternatives but are rather embedded in the master narrative
- Ecolinguistics: the stories we tell and live by shape our beliefs about the natural world
- To truly change the economy, we first need to change these **stories** we live by that constitute our social and natural world.
- Shrinking & degrowth are genuine alternatives as they radically depart from current narratives from governments responding to the climate crisis by emphasising “adaptation”, “new era of clean energy”
- Degrowth establishes itself as a way to move away from individualistic and materialistic lifestyles -> more communal, participatory ways of life

WHY DOES THE ECOMODERNIST NARRATIVE PREVAIL, IF CONTRARY EVIDENCE IS AVAILABLE?

- “Ecomodernist Manifesto” dominant as it is highly consistent with the capitalistic market system and neoliberal economic governance (Isenhour, 2016)
- But its ideological roots are a historical product, not a universal truth – many developing nations, rural populations, and Indigenous peoples with alternative ontological systems have been highly critical of ecomodernism's technocratic and apolitical suggestions (Isenhour, 2016)
- Technology’s so-called apolitisation is constructed
- Recall the beginning of this lecture – economic anthropology allows us to challenge the idea of universal economic truths, and rather focus on the cultural embeddedness of economic practices, and encourages us to learn from others!



**DEGROWTH AND
INDIGENOUS
KNOWLEDGE AND
COMMUNITIES**

- What can we learn from Indigenous communities?
- Debunking the myth of “degrowth” as novel concept
- Linking degrowth’s political aims with reparations towards Indigenous communities

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, DEGROWTH, & JUSTICE

- Energy transition (green energy) disproportionately impacts indigenous peoples' land (Alexander, 2023; Gingrich et al., 2025).
- The word “degrowth” is a Western word that incorporate concepts that have always existed within Indigenous life ways, cultures, and perspectives (Alexander, 2023): ideas of reciprocity, relationality, are key values and principles that should be leading any degrowth economic approach.
- Degrowth (as a term responding to the goal of everlasting economic growth) has nothing to do with Indigenous peoples, as growth was never their goal.
- What we need to do: include Indigenous peoples' perspectives and knowledge whilst recognising the term degrowth as a primarily Western concept that necessitates reflection and action re justice and reparations for Indigenous communities. In other words, we need to make sure that degrowth is linked to decolonial goals and justice.



**AVOIDING
ROMANTICISATION**

- Focus on feasibility, open-mindedness, and epistemic humility

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DEGROWTH

- Degrowth is in opposition to a hegemony of economic growth (Gingrich et al., 2025). Therefore, it is unsurprising that there is so much resistance to any acknowledgement of its feasibility, as it does not fit within the dominant narrative of neoliberalism (Isenhour, 2016). Yet, the idea that degrowth or opposition to ecomodernism in general is nothing more than a “leftist intuition” is empirically wrong (Isenhour, 2016).
- This is also why Hickel et al. emphasise the role that science can play in the degrowth movement. The use of scientific modelling for purposes other than the dominant hegemony can ease the transition and bring to life degrowth policies. But this requires a fundamental shift in the scientific / economic hegemony.
- This is where economic anthropology can help...
- Walker (2020), when describing different forms / definitions of equality based on ethnographies of Amazonian people, suggests that what we must learn from ethnographies is not blind imitation but rather the capacity to question our own assumptions and change these systems in both an open-minded and pragmatic manner.
- That is now the challenge for degrowth!

THE CORE OF NATURE AS AN EQUILIBRIUM

- Heikkurinen (2021): “The nature of degrowth: theorizing the core of nature for the degrowth movement”
- Heikkurinen understands degrowth as a quest to “find the balance”
- Equilibrium between futurism and romantic nostalgia
- Culturally sensitive understanding of the ecospheric crisis (not all cultures / human activities have contributed equally – some groups are more distant from nature than others)
- Need to slow down the rate of human induced change so that the Earth can come closer to a point of balance, enabling the continuity (sustainability) of diverse experience.

S U M M A R Y

- The degrowth movement is an interdisciplinary project that aims to create a better world in accordance with nature, which responds to our moral responsibilities and allows the fulfillment of “the good life”.
- The pluralism of the degrowth movement is one of its greatest strengths. We should avoid reductionist accounts of degrowth, as this movement strives on incarnating an interdisciplinary framework and approach. However, we should also recognize when there are gaps in the degrowth literature (such as concerning Indigenous knowledge and communities), gaps that must be filled if degrowth is to lead to the implementation of the values it promotes.
- When we think about degrowth, we ought to distance ourselves from overly romantic conceptions of either the past or future – rather, focus on the present and attempt to get closer to the core of nature.

THANK YOU!



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