

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (eds), *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, New York: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 9781138000773 (paper); ISBN: 9781138000766 (cloth)

For those not familiar with the history of the degrowth literature, the English term “degrowth” was adapted from the French word *décroissance*, which started as an activist slogan in the early 2000s in France of a movement for voluntary reduction in production and consumption for socio-ecological sustainability, and was officially introduced in 2008 at the first degrowth conference in Paris (p.3). Since then it has evolved from an activist slogan into an academic research domain, incorporating diverse approaches and dynamic ideas (p.xxv).

The fact that degrowth has multiple definitions and interpretations makes a transparent exchange of ideas difficult (see van den Bergh 2011). However, the editors fully accept the claim that degrowth is a “network of ideas and conversations, strongly rooted in the radical and critical traditions, but open-ended and amenable to multiple connections”, and consider this versatility a strength “where different lines of thought, imaginaries, or courses of action come together” (p.xxi).

Their book consists of 51 short entries on these various ideas and actions, along with a longer introduction and epilogue written by them. The editors are all associated with the Autonomous University of Barcelona and members of the academic network Research & Degrowth (<http://www.degrowth.org/>). Although the 53 contributors come from different ideologies, most of the ideas were formed within a reading group of Research & Degrowth in Barcelona (p.xxii).

The chapters are divided into four broad categories—“Lines of thought”; “The core”; “The action”; and “Alliances”. It also has a foreword by Fabrice Flipo and François Schneider, co-organizers of the 2008 Paris degrowth conference, which discusses the need for degrowth, what it stands for, and the risks it faces. They state that degrowth is an “exploratory avenue” (p.xxvi) which “opens up all sorts of debates that were previously

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closed” and “stirs emotions” which will prevent it from ever becoming an “issue of secondary importance” (p.xxv).

Each chapter title is marked in bold throughout the book for easy cross-referencing, and it is suggested by the editors that readers should find their own way through the book, instead of following the “standard linear way” (p.xxi). The chapters aren’t just about the different ideas and initiatives of degrowth, such as autonomy, simplicity, co-operatives, eco-communities, and urban gardening, but are also critiques of the present system, reinforcing the reasons for degrowth, such as commodity frontiers, capitalism, growth, and commodification. The chapters are diverse, and some aren’t as concretely connected to the degrowth movement as the others, such as those on pedagogy of disaster and steady-state economics. Not surprisingly, however, a majority of the chapters are focused on initiatives and actions from the global North, except for the last section on alliances which discusses the Latin American concept of *Buen Vivir* (“good living”) from Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador; the Indian theory of the “economy of permanence”; and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which states that a human being exists interdependently with others, and is not an isolated, individual entity.

The book recognizes that the viability of the term “degrowth” in the global South continues to pose a big question. Many researchers and activists who are aware of planetary boundaries and understand the need to respect human and environmental rights are not ready to use the term because of its downright critique of economic growth, which is still considered as the only way to get rid of poverty and unemployment in the developing countries. However, as the chapter on Ubuntu mentions, “the point is not whether the North has to degrow for the South to grow, but whether we can leave space for alternative native imaginaries to be part of shaping the future” (p.213).

Being a resident of urban, metropolitan India for more than half a decade, I have seen an alarming rise in commodification and the consumerist culture (which has become the yardstick to measure affluence), and not nearly enough urban initiatives based on degrowth

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principles to counteract it. Concepts such as sharing, simplicity, conviviality and commons, which were the essence of traditional living even 20 years ago, are fast being lost in most of urban India. However, there are a lot of grassroots initiatives emerging in India, too, which might not use the term degrowth, but follow the same principles of respecting the planet's limits and pursuing the core values of equity and justice, and are often called Ecological Swaraj, or Radical Ecological Democracy, initiatives (see Kothari et al. 2014).

The book thus becomes an essential resource to initiate the much needed debate for socio-ecological justice across the planet, and not just in the global North, because although I understand the reluctance to use the world degrowth in the South which faces such abject poverty and unemployment, a lot of that stems from inequality and injustice—and a capitalist economy has done precious little in the past to change it. Under such a situation, by connecting the movements from the North and South, under the umbrella of degrowth, which already confesses to being a frame of different co-existing ideas and initiatives, we can think of making some positive headway with the help of collective action beyond just the local level. One such scenario is the proposed alliance between degrowth and environmental justice movements (Martinez-Alier 2012), and because degrowth is such a strong critique of growth, hopefully it won't encounter the same failures that the previous concepts of sustainable development and green growth did.

A good book is supposed to make you think more critically and raise more questions. After finishing the book, I would have liked to know more about the degrowth activities and groups in various parts of the world mentioned in the book from Poland, Portugal, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Romania and elsewhere (p.3) to get a better sense of what degrowth transitions around the world look like, along with a sense of the challenges they face and how successful they have been in the past. But, as mentioned in the foreword, this is not an exhaustive work, and hopefully it will give rise to more collaborations and reflections on how to repoliticize the socio-ecological justice debate. The book has already been translated into ten languages, expanding its reach, and considering that many countries including China have questioned

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the relevance of degrowth within their national borders (Xue et al. 2012), and the numerous peoples' protests that have been staged across the world in recent years, be it Occupy Wall Street in the US, the Indignados in Spain, or the current Nuit Debout movement in France, I can only hope that the editors' vision of providing the 51 keywords to aid in current political debates for adopting degrowth-inspired proposals is realised, and we have begun the process of moving towards a more socio-ecologically just society.

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