



**Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D’Alisa and Federico Demaria, *The Case for Degrowth*, Cambridge: Polity, 2020. ISBN: 9781509535620 (cloth); ISBN: 9781509535637 (paper); ISBN: 9781509535644 (ebook)**

If a tree falls in the forest, does it contribute to GDP? There are some circumstances in which it could. For instance, if the tree is felled by a paid forester, or if the wood is commoditized as lumber, or even if the forest is part of a nature reserve wherein a managing conservation agency is paid to ensure it fulfills its ecosystem function via decomposition – then yes, a fallen tree contributes to economic growth! By the same token, a growing tree can contribute to GDP as well, if a worker has been paid to plant it, or if the tree is part of a paid carbon-offset program, or if its fruit is harvested for market, etc. GDP is merely a dollar figure based on the value sum of consumer, government, and private sector spending, checked by net exports.

So does an increase in GDP contribute to environmental degradation? In *theory* an increase in GDP does not necessarily have to come alongside increases in *material* throughput, if, for instance, the spending in an economy is primarily oriented around regeneratively-produced or low-impact goods and services. This theoretical “decoupling” of GDP growth from its material impacts serves as a foundation for the idea of “green growth”, the dominant framing promoted by governments seeking to make the world more sustainable.

Enter *The Case for Degrowth*, the latest book to join a growing degrowth “canon”. The book goes to great lengths to point out that such a theoretical “decoupling” of economic and material growth has *never* occurred in absolute terms, and follows up by arguing – just as famed youth climate activist Greta Thunberg did at the UN in 2019 – that the steadfast belief in the *possibility* of achieving such decoupling on the scale required to avoid ecological catastrophe is akin to believing in fairy tales.

*The Case* is written by Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D’Alisa and Federico Demaria, four notable intellectuals who have, in turn, helped shape the degrowth school of

political ecology. Readers who are familiar with the degrowth mantra will find some of the same critiques and proposals they have read previously – criticisms of green growth and growth culture in particular; calls for slowing down systems of production and consumption; and building towards low-impact and reciprocal ways of living. However, this is not to say that the book makes no novel contributions. Whereas many previous degrowth books have been hesitant to elaborate on how to bring about concrete degrowth policies, this book offers a bit more in the way of explaining what degrowth reforms might actually entail. The final two chapters of this short, five-chapter book propose various policies or reforms, such as no-growth Green New Deal policies, plans for basic care income, and work time reduction proposals. While none of these are necessarily new to the public debate (or specifically new to the degrowth imaginary), the authors have used the book to tailor these proposals to align with degrowth principles – escaping growthism; reducing dependency on market exchange and paid work for survival; and promoting acts of care, reciprocity and commoning (with a particular focus on unpaid care work predominantly performed by women, migrants, poor and racialized people). As the authors note, these changes make these otherwise mainstream proposals more radical, but also potentially politically conceivable for a larger public that has come to view growth as a “common sense” good.

As reviewers, we are sympathetic to the authors’ appeal to urgently reduce *material* throughput. We further agree that it is deeply problematic that economic growth continues to be “widely embraced as beneficial and necessary” (p.9) while material growth is widely recognized as “environmentally damaging” (p.9) – given that the two are so closely related in historical terms. Nevertheless, we hesitate to jump aboard the fairy tale thesis wholeheartedly. It is not that we disagree with the idea that “economic growth has been inseparably linked to damaging material growth, and is likely to remain so in the future” (p.9-10) – it *has*, and in all likelihood will continue to be linked so for the foreseeable future in global terms. Rather, our critique is positioned on the strategic benefits of recognizing and naming the *possibilities* of decoupling

material and economic growths in certain spaces, economic subsectors, or geographical contexts, however rare they may be.

Along these lines, we offer two potential ways to broaden the book's case for degrowth of material throughput, framed in the way of friendly criticism. First, as "a-growthers" such as Jeroen van den Bergh (2011) and (to an extent) Kate Raworth (2017) have pointed out, there is some strategic value in stepping aside from the antagonistic battle between pro- and anti-growthisms and re-directing the focus to what really matters – ecological and social wellbeing, justice and equality. Given that it is material growth that is fundamentally at fault and that an outright rejection of economic growth tends to generate such broad resistance, why is it so essential to bring along *economic* growth for the ride? We agree that the spaces where economic growth can continue without directly causing environmental degradation are limited, and that, in all likelihood, economic growth (as it is measured today) will decline long-term if we favour ecological and social objectives ahead of economic expansion. However, we wonder whether it could be strategically wiser to take a less dogmatic approach towards *economic* growth, as this might allow the movement to find common ground with a polity still subsumed by the "common sense" of growth.

An alternative approach is to dive even further into radicalism. By taking a more explicit stance on capitalism and how to move beyond it, alliances between degrowthers and more radical anti-capitalists could be broadened. The authors imply that the desired degrowth society would be situated beyond the walls of capitalism; still, they do not offer much in the way of details. For example, while basic care income could spark transformative change, its commodification could also end up "saving" capitalism from itself, minimizing the damage from its crises of accumulation and reifying exploitative relations of production. The same could be said about a Green New Deal (for which a growthless variant would be an incredibly hard sell). Yet here the authors shy away from the kind of overtly revolutionary language used by radical environmental groups such as eco-Marxists and green anarchists by maintaining a more reformist

approach. Perhaps this in itself is strategic on the authors' behalf, wanting readers to see a degrowth transition within the realm of possibility without requiring the type of uncomfortable social upheavals that typically accompany revolutionary change. However, the result is a book that seems, at times, not to appreciate the enormity of the transformation that would be required for degrowth to truly work.

Does *The Case* serve the cause of *material* degrowth by rejecting outright the possibility of some forms of future decoupling, and/or by trying to couch degrowth within the boundaries of conventional progressive proposals? We do not claim to sit on the answer, but we see value in expanding the debate. After all, climate change and environmental breakdown is not something any environmental philosophy can solve on its own, and building bridges requires compromises. What is certain, however, is that the book is an important addition to the discussion, and it deserves a spot in the libraries of those following the evolution of the degrowth/green growth debate.

## References

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