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Research brief
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Towards a research agenda for agrarian degrowth

Key points

- The world's ecological and socio-economic crises call for radical reorganisation that leads to more equitable ways of living that do not assume there must be constant growth. This is what '**degrowth**' is about.
- The '**growth question**' should be addressed alongside the '**agrarian question**' which concerns capitalist growth in the countryside and how to transition to sustainable and egalitarian alternatives. The degrowth movement and the field of critical agrarian studies (CAS) have much to teach each other about how a degrowth economy could work and feed its people.
- Ideas from a **number of thinkers** whose ideas underpin both degrowth and CAS are used to bridge the two fields and suggest a preliminary research agenda for 'agrarian degrowth'.

Keywords
degrowth – critical agrarian studies – economic growth – capitalism – deep sustainability – maldevelopment – commoning – planetary boundaries

Introduction

A world of stuttering economic growth is frightening for many, but for others the idea of 'degrowth' offers an alternative to something worse. We are reaching the peak of raw materials such as oil and phosphorous while we see an alarming increase in ecological damage and an environment that can no longer absorb our emissions and waste. The global economy is threatened with meltdown, relative poverty is on the rise,[1] while there are no indications that global GDP is decoupling from ecological impacts.[2]

More and more people and movements are questioning the world's 'maldevelopment' from different perspectives. Among these, 'degrowth' is emerging as a central counter-narrative, says ISS Assistant Professor Julien-François Gerber in a recent article.[3]

What is wrong with economic growth?

Critics of mainstream economic thinking reject the idea that growth or 'growthism' will continually benefit everyone.

Growth and the climate emergency | Proponents of growth claim that it will 'dematerialise' by doing more with fewer materials or become 'green' through technology and renewable energy.[4] Development will become 'sustainable'. However, to date no country has absolutely reduced material use while growing and there is no evidence that this will occur anytime soon.

Growth and wellbeing | The links between growth and wellbeing are also debatable. For several decades self-reported wellbeing in a number of industrialised countries has remained constant or even declined, despite GDP growth.[5] No country in the world currently manages to meet social thresholds while staying within 'planetary boundaries' (measuring climate change, phosphorus loading, nitrogen loading, freshwater use, and land-use change).[6] There is no reason to think this is impossible, but clearly some radical changes are needed.

What is 'degrowth'?

Definition | Degrowth is a field of scientific research and activism that recognises that there is an unequal flow and distribution of materials and energy in the global economy and that they are often tremendously oversized.

Degrowth's central proposition is that it is possible to realise more equal societies that use fewer resources. For this, a radical reorganisation and resizing of economies is needed. Degrowth is not only about an ecological critique of GDP growth. It also comprises a wider reflection on the relationship between nature and society and on modes of co-existing in an existentially meaningful way.

Key concepts | Degrowth has to do with concepts like sharing, commoning, caring, healing, horizontality, conviviality and simplicity. A degrowth world might take the form of a network of egalitarian and sustainable communal entities governed by direct democracy.

History | The ideas behind degrowth are not all new, but the term itself *(décroissance)* was first used France in the early 2000s. Its main roots can be traced to the radical western environmental movement of 1960s and 70s, broader 20th century critiques of capitalist modernity, the field of 'ecological economics', and finally 'post-development' theory, which critiques 'development' as a continuation of capitalist control.

Common misunderstandings about degrowth

1. **Degrowth ≠ reversing growth rates**.
   It doesn't call for 'less of the same', but for a different way of organising of appropriation, extraction, production, distribution, consumption and waste.

2. **Degrowth ≠ reducing everything**.
   Some things will increase, such as production and consumption of local items, agroecology and urban gardening.

3. **Degrowth ≠ anti-technology**.
   But about selecting what to take forward and what to leave behind.

4. **Degrowth ≠ exclusively local**.
   Serious post-growth thinking requires a global and systemic approach.

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Bridging the 'agrarian question' and the 'growth question'

Degrowth shares many concerns with critical agrarian studies (CAS). CAS challenges the mainstream narrative of rural modernisation and development, taking a broad approach to understanding life, labour and land in agrarian settings. The two fields can bring essential elements to each other and contribute to understanding alternatives, yet there have been surprisingly few bridges between the two.

Overlaps | The political economy of land and food, as well as other concepts central to CAS such as 'agroecology' and 'food sovereignty', are also key concerns for degrowth scholars.

Blindspots | The two fields can address each other's blind spots. CAS can alert degrowth to the 'agrarian myth' of simplified ideas of rural economies. Degrowth can alert CAS to the 'myth of growth', in which growth can be green and sustainable and delinked from ecological impacts.

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Five older roots for a new research agenda

This section briefly touches on ideas from five thinkers whose work forms part of the 'intellectual lineage' of contemporary CAS and degrowth scholarship. In doing so, it explores connections between the two fields and gives a coherent glimpse of what research and activism in agrarian degrowth might look like.

1. The problem of limits

Thinker | The thinking of **Simone Weil** (1909-1943), a French philosopher, activist and mystic, can be seen as a precursor to political ecology and degrowth. Making one of the earliest critiques of endless growth, she problematised the contradiction between accumulation and the limited availability of natural resources and energy. Her alternative was a vision of 'rootedness' built on autonomous communities and cooperatives, whereby those who work the land are in charge of their own farms and livelihoods.[7]

Contribution to research agenda | The problem of limits has been underestimated by some CAS scholars who support development models that cannot be realised within planetary boundaries. Bernstein, a key figure in CAS, has recognised the need for CAS to rethink relationships between technological and ecological change, between growth and nature [8]

2. Finding a balance

Thinker | **Alexander Chayanov** (1888-1937) was a Russian economist and sociologist who was a supporter of peasant households rather than large-scale farms. He argued that the economic logic of the family farm rests on certain balances – particularly between labour and consumption and between utility and drudgery. These dictate that labour increases only until the needs of the household are met, and that the peasant farm can live well without constant growth.[9]

Contribution to research agenda | For Chayanov's followers, farming should not be about accumulation but about finding the right balances for fulfilling human needs. These ideas help us imagine agrarian economies free from the drive to growth and based on the popular knowledge of balancing, defining the right scales and seeking autonomy.[10] Degrowth scholars see strong synergies with their own thinking.

Example – Bhutan as a case study for Chayanovian balances | Bhutan is one of the last countries transitioning to capitalism, with agriculture occupying 70% of the population, largely middle peasants. Despite dependence on India, Bhutan has avoided the worst aspects of globalisation. It developed a 'new development paradigm' and invited post-growth thinkers to advise. It introduced free education and healthcare, restricted foreign investment, put limits on tourism and mining, and has not joined the World Trade Organisation. It also developed the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Its founder says the strategy is 'to take the country from being a late starter in modernisation directly to a sustainable society'. More research is needed to substantiate this claim.

3. Decentralisation and autonomy

Thinker | Joseph Cornelius Kumarappa (1892-1960) was an Indian economist best-known as the founder of Gandhian economics. He promoted a decentralised and self-sufficient economy that would do away with class and caste distinctions while building on the strengths of local production and enabling villagers to control their economic destiny.[11] His proposed agrarian model was based on the smallest possible scale that a decentralised economy could meet basic needs. He suggested regional units of about 100,000 people.

He looked to the 'moral economy' and criticised deriving market prices from individual preferences. Distance between consumer and producers hinders this moral dimension, which is one of the reasons for his defence of local production and consumption.[12]

Contribution to research agenda | Rethinking modern ways of living – as with the degrowth movement today – has to begin by examining the notion of 'standards of living'. For Kumarappa, what we call 'high' standards of living are artificially created by the market. They undermine sufficiency and autonomy.

Example - agrarian communities in practice | The Amish of North America arguably have some of the abovementioned characteristics, as do the varied groups known as 'back-to-landers'. But critics say that by remaining local and by not targeting state power, these 'from below' alternatives are inconsequential. Degrowth cannot avoid revisiting these important questions.

4. The solar economy: the need to downscale

Thinker | Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1906-1994) was a Romanian-American economist and the father of ecological economics. He argued that theories of capitalism cannot be neatly applied to agrarian economies, which depend on 'biotic' resources and the 'solar flow' rather than mineral resources.

Dependent on the cyclical rhythms of nature, agrarian activity must be slower in pace and more diversified than cities and industry. The mechanisation of agriculture, with its machinery, pesticides and fertiliser, follows the logic of industrial growth, and is therefore unsustainable and detrimental to humanity in the long run.[13]

Contribution to research agenda | Georgescu-Roegen's recommendations point towards downscaling the flows of materials and energy between nature and society, rather than a 'Green New Deal' that promotes transition to renewables without demanding reductions in consumption and production.

Such deals and proposals[14] ignore the fact that renewable energy technologies can only support much smaller economies, so a transition to renewables must entail degrowth.

Example – Cuba's elements of a degrowth transition | Cuba's Special Period of the 1990s is a glimpse of a conversion from conventional to organic agriculture. In response to economic crisis, large state farms turned into cooperatives and there was a growth of urban agriculture and gardening. Food was produced with less inputs and equipment, and the 'degrowth period' saw lifestyle changes that entailed health benefits. However, the country's solid welfare state and low inequality make the generalisation of its successes difficult.

5. The politics of degrowth

Thinker | Joan Martínez-Alier is a Catalan economist and political ecologist (1939–) who has studied agrarian economies, ecological distribution conflicts and indigenous peasants' rejection of modernisation. These interests led him to developing the current of environmentalism dubbed the 'environmentalism of the poor', which combines ecological concerns and social justice.[15]

This environmental justice movement is a powerful force in the Global South. Examples include the Chipko movements against state plantations in India, the Seringueiros against large-scale ranchers in Brazil, and the Ogoni struggle against Shell in Nigeria. Many creative concepts have emerged from this socio-environmental activism, such as 'ecological debt', 'climate justice', 'biopiracy', 'food sovereignty' and 'land grabbing'. Yet many individual grassroots movements remain narrowly and locally focused. This fragmentation obstructs the development of synergies and a broader conceptual framework for societal alternatives.

Contribution to research agenda | Martínez-Alier suggested that there is an opportunity for the global environmental justice movement and the degrowth movement to forge an alliance. Degrowth offers a radical political project that could transcend local concerns, as grassroots alternatives are insufficient on their own. To scale up their impacts and achieve global change, grassroots movements need to develop horizontal networks for environmental and agrarian justice. These could become the platforms where new 'bottom-up' post-growth politics and policies could emerge.[16]

A research agenda on agrarian degrowth

What might a forward-looking research agenda in agrarian degrowth look like?

Growth and its effects

Explore the effects of growth and who benefits, in order to critically examine the common assumption that growth always increases welfare.

Research could explore how growthism in its various forms influenced the countryside. It could explore growthism's effect on poverty, on poverty and inequality in the rural world.

Limits and approaches

Investigate the limits to (agrarian) economies and how to deal with them, including a theoretical and empirical investigation of extractive and commodity frontiers.

Research could help develop a more in-depth approach to forms of agriculture that align with a degrowth society.

This could elaborate on the role of *agroecology* or, for example, territorial production, local markets, vegetarian diets and seasonal food consumption. It could also assess the appropriateness of genetically modified crops or other biotech-based agriculture.

Alternatives

Study the various existing alternatives to growthism to identify lessons learned and opportunities for collaboration.

For example, a systematic study could be conducted on the narratives and practices of various social movements (e.g. agrarian, indigenous or environmental). It could explore how these movements counter ideas of growth and reverse growth in practice. Similarly, research could look into what degrowth could learn from small farmers and community economies.

In finding alternatives, lessons can also be learned from past crises and community adaptation to depletion or recession. Moreover, proposed policies for degrowth, such as commoning, can be examined using past and present experiences within the field of CAS. Finally, research can explore the organisation of work in a post-growth context and explore the potential of allying with alternative initiatives such as the slow food movement and vegetarianism.

More information

This research brief is based on Julien-François Gerber (2020) 'Degrowth and critical agrarian studies' *The Journal of Peasant Studies,* 47:2, 235-264. DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2019.1695601.

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Endnotes

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