

A response to Savin and van den Bergh: Ceci n'est pas degrowth

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Abstract: The academic literature on degrowth and postgrowth is quickly expanding. In a recent study (“Reviewing studies of degrowth: Are claims matched by data, methods and policy analysis,” September 2024), Ivan Savin and Jeroen van den Bergh, two economists at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, make a number of problematic claims about the current state of growth-critical knowledge. This article is a response to their paper. The first section highlights three methodological flaws in their article (an overly narrow sampling protocol, a flawed definition of theoretical research, and a too-specific focus on climate change). The second section counters three dubious arguments that the authors make out of their findings (degrowth colonising other fields, the usefulness of agrowth, and the alleged opposition with environmental policies). The third and final section discusses three ways of improving the science of degrowth with better definitions, models, and policies.

Introduction

Literature reviews are usually quite uncontroversial. But this is not the case of “[Reviewing studies of degrowth: Are claims matched by data, methods and policy analysis?](#)”, a recent paper by Ivan Savin and Jeroen van den Bergh, two economists at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. “The piece sparked a meltdown,” explains [Glen Peters](#), who witnessed the online stir caused by its publication last week. [Giorgos Kallis](#), one of the leading researchers on the topic of degrowth, called it “a bad-faith hit piece” with a “weird method,” seconded by some of his colleagues who described it as an “unfair” review ([Julia Steinberger](#)) with an “extremely flawed methodology” ([Jason Hickel](#)). Let’s dive in.

Methodological flaws

The method used in the review has three main flaws. Its sampling protocol is too restrictive and excludes most of the studies covering the very topics and methods that the authors are looking for (i.e., environmental policies and quantitative studies).¹ If this point alone suffices to falsify most of the findings of the study, there are two additional issues. The authors mistakenly conflate theoretical arguments with opinions, which leads them to overlook the strongest part of the literature. Finally, they evaluate the entirety of the field through the narrow lens of climate policy, which is only a small and recent part of growth-critical studies.

Not all degrowth studies use the term “degrowth”

The review analyses 561 publications with either “degrowth” or “post-growth” in their title.² This selection process is debatable because, as degrowth specialist [Jason Hickel](#) explains, “not all degrowth research has ‘degrowth’ in the title.”³ “This is not indicative of anything,” exclaims [Julia Steinberger](#), a prominent growth-critical researcher. “Having led a large project on degrowth, which published 33 papers, roughly half of which were data analysis and modelling, only two would have qualified for the parameters of the study.”

The same bewilderment came from ecological economist [Andrew Fanning](#): “none of the large-sample quantitative publications I have been involved in were included but all of them discuss degrowth in HICs [high-income countries] and the need for post-growth policy as implications of the results.” Based on [his own calculations](#), the review only includes 1% of publications returned for the search terms “degrowth” and “postgrowth.” Even if the sample size is not a problem in itself, it becomes a severe limitation when the authors assume that such a skewed sample is representative of all the literature they claim to synthesise. This would be like reviewing romantic comedies by only including movies with “love” in the title.

In a forthcoming publication, Nick Fitzpatrick identifies 1,715 academic texts about degrowth, including 160 book chapters, 37 books, 235 student theses, and 1,263 peer reviewed papers. And even this, as we will soon see, is only the visible part of the iceberg. The tiny sample in the review is not representative of the whole field. Difficult to give any credibility to Savin and van den Bergh when their analysis on degrowth and business derives from only five articles ([Jennifer Wilkins](#), an expert on growth-critical business perspectives, found more than 80 papers referring to business strategy alone). Having myself conducted a thorough, albeit non-quantitative review of the field of degrowth in *The political economy of degrowth* (2019), I find their synthesis of the literature extremely shallow.⁴

The review “misses many of the strongest studies that have shaped the field,” says [Yannick Oswald](#), a researcher at the University of Lausanne. The sampling criteria (only including titles and not filtering editorials and other non-research papers) are biased against empirical studies. This explains why their findings differ from [Engler et al. \(2024\)](#), another review which included abstracts and excluded non-research texts. [O’Neill et al. \(2018\)](#) is a perfect example.⁵ Published in the prestigious journal *Nature Sustainability*, this groundbreaking work was the first to quantify planetary boundaries and social thresholds at the country level. Cited [1,824 times](#), the O’Neill et al. study has become a building block of the growth-critical scholarship. Not including it in a literature review of the field would be like reviewing science fiction films without mentioning Star Wars.

This study and many others (e.g., [Fanning et al., 2022](#); [Haberl et al., 2020](#); [Vogel and Hickel, 2023](#)) provide the empirical evidence to justify the need for degrowth. Since a coordinated reduction of production and consumption has not yet been attempted, there are not many empirical events to study, which is why most of the degrowth literature is theoretical. But these theories are based on empirical evidence on a variety of topics like ecological overshoot, decoupling, unequal exchange, rebound effects, etc. They may not have “degrowth” in their title, but they are an integral part of research on degrowth. Nothing strange in that. Environmental scientists do not always have “environmental studies” or even “environment” in the title of the papers they write.

Here is another example of a study that, even though it is mentioned twice in the paper, “*do not form part of the sample as they do not use the term degrowth or postgrowth in their title*” (p.6). The study by [D’Alessandro et al. \(2020\)](#) in *Nature Sustainability* uses the term “degrowth” twice in the abstract and 32 times in the main text, which is only seven pages long. Its very goal, as clearly stated by the authors, is to “develop a dynamic macrosimulation model to investigate the long-term effects of three scenarios: green growth, policies for social equity, and degrowth.” But, according to Savin and van den Bergh, this is not a degrowth study. There is obviously a sampling problem here.

The definition of what constitutes a degrowth study is not even consistent within the paper. The authors describe Naomi Klein's work as "*books promoting a degrowth strategy*" (p.9) even though the word is not used in any of her book titles, not used a single time in *On Fire* (2020), and mentioned only three times in *This changes everything* (2014) where two of them have quotation marks to refer to a cited text, and the third is used as a general reference to degrowth thinkers. The double standard is apparent; the authors categorise something as "degrowth" when it fits their worldview and exclude it when it does not.

The omitted studies are legion. [Vogel et al. \(2021\)](#) study the relationship between energy use and six dimensions of human need satisfaction in 106 countries. [Fanning and Hickel \(2023\)](#) quantifies the level of compensation owed to the global South in a 1.5°C scenario (US\$192 trillion). [Millward-Hopkins et al. \(2020\)](#) estimate the minimal energy for providing decent living standards for everyone. Back in the 2000s, the growth-critical literature was niche and devoid of empirical studies. But this is no longer the case. These papers are now the bread and butter of growth-critical research and not including them in a study of the field is either unskilful or dishonest.

Not all useful science is empirical

The study unduly discredits theoretical research. Notice their second main result: "*the large majority (almost 90 %) of studies report opinions rather than analysis*" (p.14)⁶, the catchphrase most frequently cited by people who use this study to attack degrowth. But according to the authors' definition of science, almost the entirety of the field of political economy would be considered "opinions." This would mean that *Das Kapital*, *The Great Transformation*, or even Keynes' masterpiece *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* would be nothing but stated beliefs. This is obviously mistaken: if only primary data analysis counts as science, then the entire social sciences, including a large part of economics, is nothing but subjective viewpoints.

"This hit piece [...] essentially labels the entire degrowth paradigm as 'unscientific' without much evidence," writes [Jostein Hauge](#), a professor at the University of Cambridge. "If you are going to claim that an entire academic paradigm is based on opinions rather than analysis [...] you better have bulletproof backing, because that's a loaded and potentially harmful statement." So, where is the proof for such a bombastic accusation? Well, for the authors, any study that doesn't use qualitative or quantitative data analysis and formal theoretical and empirical modelling is downgraded to the homogeneous category of "conceptual discussion and subjective opinions." So basically, anything that doesn't have "an original (set of) equation(s)" is just an opinion. Their sample of the degrowth literature contains 31 quantitative studies and 23 qualitative studies, which leaves 507 texts that are depicted as nothing but trivial opinionating.

You do not need a PhD in philosophy of science to see why this is wrong. Theoretical work is an integral part of science, especially in nascent fields of study. New research areas always start with fundamental theorising. When [Corvellec et al. \(2021\)](#) develop the concept of "resourcification," they are conducting fundamental theoretical research, offering a new answer to the question 'What is a resource?' Even within observation-based science, theorising is an important process. Rigorous research requires us to name the phenomenon under study, to develop concepts, analogies, ideal-types, patterns, counterfactuals, typologies, classifications, associations, etc. Without this process, there would be no tentative theory ready to be formalised, modelled, and empirically tested. I doubt that Jeroen van den Bergh would say that [his own work on agrowth](#), classified as "analysis" in *Ecological Economics*, is just a personal opinion.

Without theory, there could be no empirical work. How would you measure resource use without being able to define what is a resource? Take the concept of ecological unequal exchange. In a 1998 article, the anthropologist Alf Hornborg developed for the first time an "[ecological theory of](#)

[unequal exchange](#).” This tentative new theory led to further analytical work to better conceptualise the phenomenon, which eventually created the very possibility for empirical work. So, if Alf Hornborg had not taken the time to theorise ecologically unequal exchange into existence, we would never have known that for every unit of labour that the South imported from the North, they had to export 13 units to pay for it (one of the results of [an empirical study from 2022](#)).

Let’s take another example: Kate Raworth’s famous “doughnut economics.” In 2012, she published [a conceptual working paper at Oxfam](#) where she developed for the first time her theory of a safe and just space for humanity. Without this precious theorising, [O’Neill et al. \(2018\)](#) would never have been able to try to quantify the doughnut because the conceptual idea of the doughnut would not have existed. Without this theoretical innovation, all the empirical research projects applying the doughnut to cities like [Brussels](#) and [Amsterdam](#), to universities like [UNIL](#), or to [countries](#) and [regions](#) would never have existed. So, if one were to review the field of doughnut economics, it would have been unjust to categorise Kate’s initial paper as a mere subjective opinion. It was not. It was fundamental theoretical research.

There is a paragraph-long section where the authors accuse researchers working on degrowth of using too many [zombie nouns](#), terms created by adding suffixes like -ity, -tion, or -ism to an adjective, a verb, or another noun. First, it’s not fair criticism since most researchers do it; plus, the authors bring no tangible proof that there is something special about the degrowth literature. Most scientists are terrible writers but that’s another problem.⁷ One should differentiate unnecessary zombie nouns, which should indeed be replaced by simpler terms, from actual concepts. “Decommodification,” “economicism,” or “hegemony” for example, are concepts. They cannot be replaced by synonyms without losing depth and precision. The very essence of theorising consists in creating new concepts, which necessarily involves nominalisations (the formal term for zombie nouns). Cherry-picking a handful of funky titles as Savin and van den Bergh do borders on pseudoscience. They report finding “productivism” in the title of an academic paper. Shocking – call the cops.

A small comment about case studies. Savin and van den Bergh select seven case-studies as proof that “*degrowth studies when qualitative often employ non-representative case studies*” (p.9). First, why pick these 7 studies out of the 23 in the sample that conduct qualitative data analysis? As often in the paper, no justification is given. Second, this is a total misunderstanding of what case studies are, how they work, and how – and what – you can generalise out of single case studies. There are [specific standards](#) that should be met to generalise out of a case study, and so if Savin and van den Bergh want to show that degrowth case studies are indeed invalid, they must demonstrate, for each study, that these are not met. Should we discard [Kallis et al. \(2022\)](#), which went through multiple rounds of reviews in a reputable journal well-acquainted with these methods, just because two random economists question “*how representative such islands are for most of the modern world*” (I don’t think anyone claims they are) and complain that “*their population sizes are very different*” (p.9). How would they even know, one may wonder? Not only have they only read the abstract of the paper, but both authors of the review are trained as orthodox economists, scholars who typically know very little about case study methods.

This criticism leads to an interesting conundrum.⁸ If it’s true that 90% of the sample is nothing but “opinions disguised as (sloppy) science” ([J. van den Bergh](#)) and that the degrowth literature “balance between trivialities or unproven statements” ([J. van den Bergh](#)), then this challenges the scientific credibility of *Ecological Economics* as a journal since it’s where most of the articles in the sample were published. So, if the editorial team is reading this: either you stand by the paper’s conclusions and by extension acknowledge that your journal has repeatedly published unscientific content, or you must admit that there is something fishy about the Savin and van den Bergh review.

Not all degrowth studies are about climate change

Even though the first sentence of the abstract defines degrowth “*as a strategy to confront environmental and social problems*,” the review only focuses on climate policy. This is too narrow. It would be like assessing the performance of a triathlon athlete by only checking how fast they swim. No, the very essence of triathlon is to both swim, cycle, and run. Same for degrowth: its defining characteristic as a concept is to bring together sustainability, democracy, justice, and wellbeing, all of them applied to a specific phenomenon, the reduction of production and consumption.

Discussing the ten most frequently cited policy proposals in the degrowth literature – a result from [Fitzpatrick et al. \(2022\)](#) – the authors write that “*most of these are not really environmental/climate policies*” (p.11). No, they are not. Universal basic income, worktime reduction, and housing cooperatives, for example, are proposals mainly – although not exclusively – addressing the other goals associated with the concept of degrowth (making democracy more participative, reducing inequality, and securing well-being). It is deceitful to evaluate the entirety of the degrowth literature solely based on climate mitigation. Since the social and the ecological are indissociable, ecological economists must be simultaneously conscious of both to avoid advocating for outcomes that either bear no relation to biophysical reality or misread a specific social context.

“*What [does] the degrowth approach really add?*” (p.11), ask the authors, without realising that it is precisely this plurality of objectives that renders the degrowth literature useful. Would giving a basic income in [vouchers, local currencies, or direct access to public services](#) be a way to avoid environmentally undesirable rebound effects? Is [worktime reduction](#) an effective strategy to avoid unemployment during a period of economic contraction? Do [housing cooperatives](#) remove the growth imperative inherent in a for-profit model of housing provision, and do they open the way for a more ecologically efficient sharing of living spaces? These studies are not mainly and only about climate mitigation but they nonetheless bear essential insights about how to navigate social-ecological transitions.

Dubious claims

Given the methodological flaws exposed above, the results of the study should be taken with modesty. And yet they are not. Throughout the paper, the authors bombast several questionable messages. (This sentence from the review is perfectly adapted for self-criticism: “*despite such a meagre basis, the language in the paper breathes a righteousness, as if there are no doubts at all,*” p.10.) I’ll here focus on three doubtful arguments. First, degrowth is not colonising other areas of research, it’s a conceptual meeting point for different groups of scholars. Second, there are analytical differences between degrowth and postgrowth. Third, there is no opposition between degrowth and policymaking as environmental reforms are an integral part of any degrowth strategy.

Is degrowth colonising other areas of research?

According to the authors, “*a lot of the research under the label of degrowth is not original but come down to relabelling and colonizing existing research*” (p.14). This is a strange argument, especially at a time where everyone keeps repeating that scholars should get out of their silos and make more effort to engage in multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary projects. (Let’s add that, considering the tragedy of real-existing colonial practices, using the term for such trivial matters is rather clumsy.) I believe that the very opposite is true: we should value epistemologically agile research areas like degrowth studies for they provide fertile ground for diverse scholars to come up with new theories.

They cite worktime reduction and circular economy as examples of “colonised” academic territories. There might be a large literature on circular economy, but I cannot think of many articles that look at resource circularity from the perspective of degrowth, asking, for example, whether a fully circular economy could effectively function given the current scale of resource use in high-income nations. This would be an interesting degrowth study. Same, the literature on worktime reduction is huge, but very few of these articles focus on working less as a specific policy to mitigate unemployment during a period of economic contraction. Is reducing average working time a viable alternative to firing employees for a company faced with dwindling demand? Here is another degrowth-related research question I would like to read more about.

Either degrowth scholars repackage old science or people use the term as a marketing device, say the authors. “*Degrowth seems just a term used to attract attention of a wider readership*” (p.12). Let’s start by noticing that this contradicts one of their main claims, namely degrowth lacking support. Why would people use the term to “attract attention of a wider readership” if degrowth is such a repulsive word? Besides, and like often in the paper, the authors do not bring any convincing evidence that this is anything more than a marginal practice; they just pick nine random papers that do it and assume it’s a trend.

On the other hand, there are many examples of useful adoption of the concept in new fields. Take the flourishing literature on degrowth in tourism studies or architecture, for instance. The fact that a new academic community starts using a concept is the best proof that there is value in it. There is an overlap of interest in many of these topics and it’s a good thing to see scientists from different research backgrounds working together. For instance, Juliet Schor, one of the leading scholars on worktime reduction, has co-authored the *Nature* article “[Degrowth can work – here’s how science can help](#)” (2022). This is not appropriation, it’s collaboration.

“*The fact that degrowth studies lack interaction with the literature on policy instruments and their performance on key criteria may explain why many climate researchers and policy experts do not support a degrowth position (King et al., 2023)*” (p.9). Again, there is a contradiction: degrowth would both be “colonising” other fields while “lacking interaction” with them.⁹ Another case of prejudiced trial: it’s wrong when they do and wrong also when they don’t. Let me remind the authors of the last sentence of the abstract of the cited study (which Ivan Savin co-authored): “This finding underscores the importance of considering alternative post-growth perspectives, including agrowth and degrowth strategies, to cultivate a more comprehensive discourse on sustainable development strategies.” This is a wiser mentality than this ideologically loaded review.

Overall, this is hard to believe. If there was truly “*nothing new under the degrowth sun*” (p.12), why would so many people suddenly decide to study and research degrowth and why would so many media pay attention to it? The authors make 16 years of degrowth research look like a grand collective heist, some kind of organised academic counterfeiting. But why would the European Research Council give 10 million euros to fund a project on “[pathways towards post growth deals](#)”? Why is the [latest IPCC report](#) mentioning degrowth several times and why would the next IPBES report devote a full section to the topic? [The popularity of degrowth is on the rise](#), and Savin and van den Bergh’s attempt to show that this is mass hysteria is just unconvincing.

Degrowth, postgrowth, or agrowth?

“*As a fair number of studies use the term ‘postgrowth’ to denote degrowth type of sentiments, we decided to include this as a key term in our search*” (p.1). Bundling these two concepts without further explanation is unrigorous. The authors notice that “*ten years ago virtually all studies used the term ‘degrowth’, while in recent years some 25% of studies use the term ‘postgrowth’, in most cases meaning degrowth*” (p.3). While some isolated papers may muddle the two terms (again, this should not be a

surprise: there are cases of shoddy science in all research fields), claiming that an entire field of scholarship misuses its key concepts is a serious accusation that requires thorough backing with numerous citations and examples; the authors provide none.

Here is a proposal. I think “postgrowth” should be used in two instances. One should refer to *post-growth studies* as a broad term bringing together different strands of the growth-critical literature (e.g., degrowth, limits to growth, steady-state economics, eco-socialism, doughnut economics, voluntary simplicity, etc.). Just as “post-capitalism” stems from a critique of capitalism, post-growth is a good umbrella term for academic approaches that depart from a critique of economic growth. The term is also often used to describe the utopia of a future society emancipated from growth imperatives, e.g. a *post-growth society*.

The same goes for “degrowth.” It can refer to that sub-field of postgrowth studies, namely research that most directly engages with system-wide reductions of production and consumption. And it can also be used to name the concrete phenomenon under study, what I will later define as *a downscaling of production and consumption to reduce ecological footprints planned democratically in a way that is equitable while securing wellbeing*.

Definitions aside, the authors argue that it is easier to get support for policies “*without stressing this [i.e., degrowth] in the promotion of such policies*” (p.11). This may be true but, in my opinion, that should not concern us too much. Degrowth is an academic concept, and I don’t think scientists should name their theories based on what is considered linguistically sexy in parliament. This is science, not a beauty pageant. If “degrowth” sounds like a reduction in aggregate production and consumption, that’s because it is. The term does not sugar-coat what it studies.

When asked on Twitter, if not green growth and not degrowth, then what? [Jeroen van den Bergh](#) quickly points to “agrowth” as a third way. The marketing of that concept has been a career-defining crusade for him (e.g., [Environment versus growth – A criticism of “degrowth” and a plea for “a-growth”](#)), even though the original term is not his. The idea of *a-croissance* (a-growth) was coined by French degrowth scholar Serge Latouche in the early 2000s, a rhetorical quip he regularly used in his texts and conferences.

I personally don’t use the term “agrowth” because I don’t find it useful. First, the way that Jeroen van den Bergh uses it reduces degrowth down to a mere economic contraction. The apparent neutrality of the agrowth approach that makes it appealing is also its weakness: it does not commit to anything except a critical stance towards GDP, a view that is already consensual, even amongst neoclassical economists. Second, it implicitly contradicts a solid body of literature demonstrating the impossibility of lowering ecological footprints while maintaining current levels of production and consumption – see, for example, [Hickel and Kallis \(2019\)](#), another well-known growth-critical study not included in their sample. Third, I find it to be unnecessarily abstract, conceptually hollow, and culturally clumsy because of its religious connotations. Because of these reasons, I doubt the term will gather much traction. History has proved me right so far: there is no agrowth movement and the concept is mostly kept alive by Jeroen van den Bergh alone.

Degrowth versus environmental policy?

In the introduction of the paper, the authors trick readers with a false dichotomy. After defining degrowth as a strategy “*to reduce the size of the market economy as the key strategy to solve environmental problems*,” they write: “*as opposed, policy researchers tend to regard ambitious climate policy as fundamental to solving climate change*.” Same statement in this post online: “*You think degrowth is the only solution in town? What about environmental and climate policy?*” ([J. van den Bergh](#)). This is not an accurate picture. What defines the degrowth approach is the assumption that a

policy package that manages to sufficiently lower a country's ecological footprint will unavoidably involve a significant reduction of production and consumption.

There is no opposition between degrowth and environmental policy. In making this comment, the authors imply that people researching degrowth naïvely believe in the existence of a 'growth button' hidden somewhere at the Ministry of Economy, and that a degrowth strategy simply consists in turning down GDP. This is, of course, nonsense. The task of slowing down a modern economy to achieve the quadruple objectives of degrowth (sustainability, democracy, justice, well-being) requires a diversity of levers, many of them indeed studied by scholars outside of the degrowth field.

In [Fitzpatrick et al. \(2022: 3\)](#), we reuse a definition I developed during my PhD: a degrowth policy proposal is "a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organisation or individual aiming to achieve the objectives of degrowth" ([Parrique, 2019: 485](#)). Piketty's capital tax became a degrowth policy only when it was picked up and fitted to the degrowth policy agenda. What matters is not where the policy idea came from but how it is mobilised and why. The authors call [Germain \(2017\)](#) "confusing" for calling "a tax levied on the exploitation of the natural resource" a degrowth policy. Yet, in the simplified model developed in Germain's paper, production is proportional to extraction rates, and so a tax on resource use has a direct impact on output. Besides, who cares who first talked about taxing resources and what was their disciplinary background. This is not history of thought. As the field of degrowth studies develops, its researchers mobilise more and more policies, some of them borrowed from outside the field, and others invented within. The only thing that really matters is the final policy agenda they have and whether it is fit for purpose (more about this in the next section).

Improving degrowth science

The very existence of this review is evidence that degrowth is attracting more and more attention. Again, this contradicts one of their main claims about degrowth being niche. If it was that arcane, why would non-specialists spend so much effort engaging with the topic? Although the study was only published a week ago, it has already been weaponised by loud social media bros who like to bark at stuff.¹⁰ In an attempt to channel this energy into more constructive directions, I shall here point to three areas of work to improve the current state of knowledge about degrowth.

Better definitions

The authors complain about "*an enormous diversity of definitions and interpretations of degrowth*" (p.11). First problem, unlike the [Engler et al. \(2024\)](#) review, the paper has no conceptual section. They briefly discuss terms and definitions in the introduction, but their discussion is completely subjective and doesn't contain a single reference. If they had done a proper search, they would have realised that the definition by [Schneider et al. \(2010: 512-13\)](#)¹¹ is dominant within the field. The 8 definitions the authors select poorly represent usual practices; this is again a case of cherry-picking aimed at depicting degrowth in a bad light.

Besides, the term "enormous" is a bit of a stretch. In a forthcoming paper, I analyse 115 definitions of degrowth in English and French ranging from 2006 to 2024. The main finding is that, even though terms vary, the essence of the idea is consistent throughout the literature. In an attempt to stabilise the term, I define it as "a downscaling of production and consumption to reduce ecological footprints planned democratically in a way that is equitable while securing wellbeing."

The downscaling of production and consumption is the conceptual core of degrowth, a feature that separates it from other sustainability paradigms. Even though they may differ in essence and magnitude, all forms of degrowth involve, by definition, lower levels of production and consumption.

The four principles (sustainability, democracy, justice, and wellbeing) further clarify the nature of that downscaling. They can be considered necessary requirements for an economic contraction to qualify as degrowth. What makes degrowth whole as a concept is the co-existence of these principles applied to a specific process. Degrowth does not hold a monopoly over these ideas, but it does offer something new and unique when it articulates them together.

Just like a mammal is defined by a finite set of features such as hair or fur, warm-blood, milk, and vertebrae, degrowth is indissociable from the four principles of sustainability, democracy, justice, and wellbeing. So, when Savin and van den Bergh define degrowth as “*a deliberate reduction in the scale of economic activity to achieve sustainability and social justice*” (p.1), they are missing half of the picture. The goal of degrowth is not “*to decline income and consumption*” (p.11); selective (democracy) reductions of production and consumption are only means to reduce environmental pressures (sustainability) in rich regions of the world (justice) to ensure a decent quality of life for all (wellbeing).

“*Many papers confuse a strategy or planned degrowth with low, zero or negative growth as an unplanned outcome*” (p.12). Let’s solve that confusion right now: low growth can be called *low growth*, as opposed to *high* or *fast growth*. Zero growth or no growth is usually called *stagnation* (or *secular stagnation*), which should not be confused with Herman Daly’s concept of “steady state.” Negative growth in our current growth-based economies is called a *recession* (or a *depression* if it lasts long), with a variety of simpler terms like economic *contraction* or *slowdown*. As for *degrowth*, the term should be reserved for a particular kind of economic contraction: one that is democratically planned to reduce ecological footprints in a way that is equitable while securing wellbeing. This is the phenomenon that degrowth scholars study.

Better models

Does the literature lack “*macroeconomic and systemic perspectives on the overall impacts of degrowth strategies*” (p.5)? I would say the jury is still out on that one. There is the foundational work of [Victor and Rosenbluth \(2007\)](#) who developed the model LOWGROW for Canada, and a swathe of interesting follow-ups with Tim Jackson – e.g., [Jackson and Victor \(2016\)](#) on inequality or [Jackson and Victor \(2015\)](#) on debt. There is the work of [D’Alessandro et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Briens \(2015\)](#), who both build different system dynamics models to run degrowth scenarios in France, and [Gran \(2017\)](#) who adapted LOWGROW for Germany. Both [Kikstra et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Li et al. \(2023\)](#) have recently run an integrated assessment model to simulate degrowth scenarios for Australia. (For a review of 22 ecological macroeconomic models used in the growth-critical literature, see [Hardt and O’Neill, 2017](#).)

Is this enough? I don’t know. I would say it’s already miraculous that so many people are working with a concept that came into academic existence only 16 years ago, especially given that it’s systematically bullied in academia, this very review being perfect evidence of that. The accumulated number of Master and PhD theses written on the topic is skyrocketing and so is the number of academic publications. The 38 people of the [REAL project](#) are currently building a model for Spain to explore degrowth scenarios. A group of 8 researchers at the University of Lausanne is planning something similar with Switzerland. There is the research project on Models, Assessment, and Policies for Sustainability (MAPS), led by ecological economist Dan O’Neill, and also the projects [ToBe](#) and [MERGE](#). This is fast, much faster than the development of growth theories actually, which started in the 1950s but have for the last two decades, “made no scientific progress toward a consensus,” according to [Paul M. Romer](#), one of the leading growth theorists.

Could this go faster? Sure, just allocate more funding to researchers who study degrowth (and stop bullying them). But let’s be careful. For the authors, “*it is important to have a good insight in the systemic and macroeconomic consequences of radical degrowth strategies before talking about their*

implementation. Too many studies seem to be willing to undertake a large socio-economic experiment with big risks without having insight into the bigger picture” (p.14). As if degrowth researchers had the possibility of running such society-wide experiments. What worries me here is the assumption that the present situation is fine. To illustrate my point, I will reuse a passage from the conclusion of my [PhD dissertation](#):

“To the risk averse and the fearful, I say that violence is already among us. [...] The violence of a revolutionary change must always be weighed against the violence of letting the system run exploitation-as-usual, and in the situation we find ourselves in, it is fearfulness that is the greatest danger. [...] To the well-intentioned reformers procrastinating action in wait of ‘more data’ and ‘better knowledge,’ I say this is fighting a losing battle. We could spend centuries extracting theories out of the economy like one reads stories in whale bones and coffee grounds. [...] knowledge should not become an excuse. Let us not be the one ‘who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish because he had no wings to fly’” ([p.711](#)).

The hypothetical existence of a model that will predict a fail-safe, win-win-win path to sustainability is nothing but a [sci-fi scenario](#). The very mention of such a possibility sustains a dangerous discourse of delay. Moreover, it feels disingenuous to maunder on about the potential perils of degrowth when the very idea of degrowth stems from a direct application of the precautionary principle, a strategy opposed to Earth-threatening techno-utopian schemes like eco-modernism that rely on uncertain solutions like geo-engineering. Degrowth comes with its own political, social, and economic challenges but it has the benefit of being reversible. Anything we scale back today is something we can possibly resume producing in the future if new, cleaner technology allows it.

Better policies

The authors cite a sentence from one of my papers: “most [degrowth] proposals lack precision, depth, and overlook interactions between policies” ([Fitzpatrick et al., 2022](#)), using it as a stand-alone proof that degrowth policies are worthless. The situation is not as black and white.¹² The literature is not static and certain proposals are becoming more detailed. Take basic income, for example. It could be considered the oldest degrowth proposal since it appeared in the 2002 issue of the French magazine *Silence* where the concept of “décroissance soutenable” [sustainable degrowth] was coined. Twenty years later, there are at least nine different basic income proposals, each with its own design. In contrast, it is true that other proposals have remained largely the same over the past two decades. I think most of this can be explained by the fact that there have been, until recently, very few people researching degrowth, and so many topics have remained unexplored.

Savin and van den Bergh conclude that “*more rigorous and comparative studies of ‘degrowth policies’ are needed to warrant the degrowth approach*” (p.11). This seems like a big claim for such a selective review, especially given the severe methodological weaknesses highlighted above. Having spent considerable time reading degrowth studies, I would say that more rigorous and comparative studies of degrowth studies are indeed welcome. But I don’t think that they are “*needed to warrant the degrowth approach.*” The idea of degrowth is based on theoretical and empirical work in ecological economics, which has brought solid evidence to question the possibility of green growth (e.g., [Haberl et al., 2020](#); [Vadén et al., 2020](#); [Vogel and Hickel, 2023](#); [Hickel and Kallis, 2019](#); [Parrique et al., 2019](#)). If you cannot show that a sufficiently large and fast, absolute decoupling of GDP from all important environmental pressures is possible, then you must accept that sustainability will unavoidably imply an economy-wide reduction of production and consumption.

The authors are in favour of not mentioning degrowth when talking about environmental policies because “*outcomes are uncertain*” (p.11). If you manage to reduce ecological footprints without reducing GDP, that is, by definition, green growth. From the perspective of degrowth, outcomes are as certain as they can be given the imperfections of scientific knowledge: high-income countries that want to lower their ecological footprints will have to produce and consume less. We now know with a high degree of confidence that such a macroeconomic slowdown is needed.

The questions that remain are: How big will that contraction be? In which regions should it take place and for how long? And most importantly: How can it be intelligently organised to be, not only ecologically effective, but also socially acceptable, fair, and conducive to improving quality of life? These are the policy questions on which we should work, and I’m sure that the authors of this review could become powerful allies if they were to apply their research strength to solving these problems.

Conclusion

“What a waste of academic endeavour,” writes [Jennifer Wilkins](#), commenting on the review. And indeed, I too feel ashamed about the length of this response. This is wasted energy for everyone involved that could have been spent conducting useful research. The only reason I engaged with the review is because it’s currently being used politically to discredit degrowth and could potentially be used to cast doubt on the very idea of ecological sustainability. [Jostein Hauge](#) sums it up well: “spreading false claims about degrowth is not going to advance knowledge about ecological economics or political ecology.” I agree and I’m afraid that it might do the very opposite and damage public trust in environmental sciences more broadly.

The study grants itself the power of “*judging a new line of research*” (p.2), “*to warrant the degrowth approach*” (p.11), and comes with a life-threatening verdict: “*one is inclined to infer that degrowth cannot (yet) be considered as a significant field of academic research*” (p.14). This is a manipulative overstatement. I don’t think that running a topic modelling analysis on samples of text that are 192 words in length can tell you much about the current state of a research field. Would you trust a movie expert who only watches trailers?

The review is crippled with elementary methodological mistakes. “I’d say your manual method is 5-10 years out of date,” deplores [Andrew Fanning](#), a researcher at the University of Leeds. The data used (titles and abstracts only) would be acceptable for a more impartial and distanced bibliometric study with a larger set of papers. But this is inappropriate for what the authors sell as an in-depth literature review. Given that it is authored by university professors and not bachelor students, it is fair to assume that we’re dealing here with dogma. This paper is not only ignorant. It’s something much more sinister and personal. It trivially uses numbers and statistics to defend a pre-existing ideological opinion. So yes, it is indeed nothing but a hit piece.

I won’t defend the degrowth literature as a monolithic whole; part of it is indeed poor science, and the authors have done a decent job at digging for the worst bits. But I think that’s true for all academic fields, especially recent ones. What’s reprehensible is that, instead of sorting the good from the bad, the authors cherry-pick the worst in a conscious attempt to misconstrue the field.¹³ Throughout the paper, they carefully select only pieces of studies that highlight the challenges of degrowth while disregarding all the others.¹⁴ So, this response is not a defence of degrowth, it is an attack on bad science.

I should say that I saw it coming. It is hard to believe that Jeroen van den Bergh could conduct an “objective” review since he has spent recent years engaging in a John Wick-like personal vendetta to trash degrowthers.¹⁵ This kind of academic road rage has no place in peer-reviewed journals – that’s what personal blogs are for.

Notes

¹ This was a point stressed in the [Engler et al. \(2024: 12\)](#) review: “It is also important to understand the literature that does not mention degrowth, post-growth, or steady-state but is nevertheless concerned with economic throughput. This includes a broad monetary growth imperative (MGI) debate that is intimately concerned with economic growth. Further, much work in the degrowth field, including the MGI debate, either using degrowth specifically or not, exists in white papers or books and is thus not included in this study. Finally, there is an emerging body of work in ecological macroeconomics and other topics that are tangential to but do not specifically mention degrowth.” Also: “Much of the degrowth discussion since 2008 has occurred outside the peer-reviewed literature and instead in white papers, essays, reports, and academic and non-academic books. Due to the nature of the methodology, however, this body of degrowth work is not included in the present study.”

² 376 articles, 73 book chapters, 28 reviews, and 84 cover letters, notes, editorials, conference papers, and short surveys.

³ “Not all degrowth research has ‘degrowth’ in the title! Just as not all research on political economy has ‘political economy’ in the title. Basics. Huge swathes of research are ignored... all the work on demand-side mitigation, sufficiency-oriented approaches, energy convergence, ecosocialism, decoupling, doughnut economics, etc – including work reviewed by the IPCC – all of it is ignored” ([Jason Hickel](#)). See also [Giorgos Kallis](#): “Weird method. Say I want to write a review on the state of economics. I choose all articles with the word ‘economics’ in the title and then – surprise surprise – I find most of them are reviews. What an indictment of the state of economics: ‘they are only writing reviews!’”

⁴ Personal anecdote. Back in 2020 when my PhD thesis [The political economy of degrowth](#) was published, Jeroen van den Bergh attacked me online claiming that my dissertation should not be taken seriously because it wasn’t quantitative and peer-reviewed. (That’s quite ironic. I don’t know how many people peer-reviewed the Savin and van den Bergh study, maybe two or three people at most, and they obviously did a bad job since it was published in its current state.) I doubt Jeroen spent much time reading my work, which he never really engaged with back then. It was just the usual degrowth-is-ideology argument, given with authority from a mainstream economist. But the fact that I didn’t conduct unnecessary foolish statistics does not turn my work into opinions and theirs into serious empirical science. (I doubt that finding that “*degrowth studies with shorter titles do not receive more citation*” (p.3) is Nobel prize material.) There is as much opinion in theirs as in mine or others, but at least I don’t hide it as supposed “statistics.”

⁵ [Jeroen van den Bergh](#) has argued online that this cannot be considered a degrowth study because it is based on the doughnut theory of Kate Raworth who is sceptical about using the term degrowth. But her work certainly falls within the research area of postgrowth. And if that’s so, why is it not included in the sample? Answer: because it doesn’t have “postgrowth” in the title. We’re back at why their sampling criteria are unsatisfactory.

⁶ Savin and van den Bergh report that 9.6% of the studies in their sample perform quantitative or qualitative data analysis. But this is because 32% of their sample is composed of conference papers, book chapters, reviews, editorials, or notes and comments. The [Engler et al. \(2024\)](#) review excludes these and find that 23% of the 475 reviewed papers conduct quantitative modelling.

⁷ [Helen Sword](#), [Stephen Pinker](#), or, my all-time favourite, [Deirdre McCloskey](#) should indeed be compulsory readings for all academics, including the authors of that very review.

⁸ I would like to thank Georgios Chalkias for suggesting the idea behind this paragraph.

⁹ Here is an example. In discussion of one of the policy mentioned in [Fitzpatrick et al. \(2022\)](#), “declining caps on resource use and emissions,” the authors write that such a policy is “*already implemented by the EU through its Emissions Trading System*” (p.11). Another case of degrowthers-are-wrong-whatever-they-do. Are we engaging

with current policymaking or are we not? Plus, their reaction is absurd: it would be like scolding people who ask for democracy by reminding them that there is such a thing as the parliament. If growth-critical scholars spend effort working on ecological caps, it is because they think that the policies currently in place need improvement. Who can blame them for that?

¹⁰ “Degrowth is another left wing pseudoscience swindle, like Marxism and Gender Ideology” ([Brent A. Williams](#)); “degrowth is not science, it is some people wanting to do marxism but make it chic again” ([George Berry](#)); “Degrowth is just a political opinion disguised as something serious” ([Jesper Bylund](#)); “Shock. The people perpetuating the greatest lie of all time (degrowth) get found out by a simple literature review” ([Will O’Brien](#)). “Degrowth is charlatanism” ([Andreas von Astiburg](#)). Most of these accounts retweeted a post from [Rutger Bregman](#) calling that review “devastating.”

¹¹ “An equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long-term [and which is] offered as a social choice, not imposed as an external imperative for environmental or other reasons.”

¹² Here is a passage summarising all the results of that study: “This led to five reflections regarding the precision, frequency, visibility, diversity of policies, as well as their interactions. First, there is a great disparity in details from some proposals which have been studied in detail, and others that are only mentioned in passing. This connects to our second finding, which is that certain proposals are more popular than others. Thirdly, most proposals focus more on what a policy is supposed to achieve (objectives) rather than how it is supposed to achieve it (instruments), often ignoring a diversity of transitional changes. Our fourth finding is that degrowth is increasingly diverse, with proposals being added every time a new community of thinkers and practitioners (not exclusive categories, of course) starts using the concept. And finally, we noticed that most policies are studied in isolation, and that not many authors have so far focused on the interactions between the elements within the degrowth agenda.”

¹³ The condescending tone of the paper gives a good taste of what the authors truly think of the topic: “degrowth type of sentiment” (p.1), the “degrowth community” (p.5), the ““degrowth studies”” (p.7), ““degrowth thesis”” (p.10), ““degrowth policies”” (p.11), ““the degrowth interpretation”” (p.11) – notice the use of scare quotes on the last four ones.

¹⁴ They even go the extra mile by citing bits of studies not included in their sample (e.g., [D’Alessandro et al., 2020](#)), as long as they highlight an obstacle degrowth: “*D’Alessandro et al. (2020) show in a macrosimulation model that a degrowth scenario can achieve lower inequality at the cost of a higher public deficit, which questions the political feasibility of such a scenario*” (p. 7). This a good reminder of how faulty their methodology is. If the main finding of the paper above is to identify an obstacle to degrowth, should it not be categorised as a degrowth study?

¹⁵ The authors, or at least Jeroen van den Bergh, sits in the very same building than Jason Hickel, Giorgos Kallis, along with the largest concentration of degrowth scholars). This paper is closer to a coffee machine conflict than to genuine science. Whatever – most probably ego-driven – issues the authors have with their colleagues, I suggest talking to them might be a better solution than wasting precious research and reading time in a male-as-usual who’s-got-the-biggest-science competition.

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