# A response to Daniel Susskind: Degrowth – a reckoning

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**Abstract**: This essay offers a critical response to Daniel Susskind's book "Growth: A Reckoning" (2024), examining the five challenges he raises against degrowth: its conceptual clarity, the feasibility of perpetual growth on a finite planet, whether it amounts to "a recession with a human face," its alleged lack of imagination, and its political possibility. I argue that Susskind conflates the short-term feasibility of green growth with the long-term validity of degrowth theory, leans on thin empirical evidence – a single blog figure for absolute decoupling and dated studies on the Easterlin paradox – and exhibits a "carbon tunnel vision" that reduces ecological breakdown to emissions alone while proposing only a carbon tax in response. Against this, I defend degrowth as a planned, democratic, and equitable downscaling of production and consumption in high-income, high-overshoot nations – distinct from recession and grounded in planetary-boundaries science and post-growth scholarship. I clarify the definition of degrowth, marshal the decoupling evidence, and reframe the question of political feasibility as one of collective imagination rather than technical impossibility, concluding that the burden of proof rests with the defenders of growth and that prudence under ecological uncertainty favours sufficiency over speculative techno-optimism.

## Introduction

I've just finished *Growth: A Reckoning* (2023) by Daniel Susskind. Professor of business at Gresham College in London, he's a skilful writer and anyone interested in the study of economic growth should enjoy this book. There is much to comment on, but to remain within my area of expertise, I'll only analyse his take on degrowth, a topic he addresses specifically in Chapter 7: Degrowth and more sporadically throughout the book. The author raises five questions that are good departure points for a constructive dialogue: Is degrowth unclear? Is infinite growth possible on a finite planet? Is degrowth a recession with a human face? Does degrowth lack imagination? And is degrowth politically impossible?

## Is degrowth unclear?

Daniel Susskind finds degrowth unclear. "In truth, what the degrowth movement actually stands for is not clear. Its literature is large, fast-growing and fascinating. But it is also contradictory and hard to follow, written in the clashing terminology of different disciplines, obscured by academese, inflated with political rhetoric and full of distracting disagreements between partisan thinkers with diverging personal motivations" (p. 150).

It's harsh but it's partly true. The degrowth scholarship[1] might be a treasure trove of useful concepts but it's messy and, at times, unnecessarily esoteric. As of now, and after 20 years of existence, there is still no widely accepted definition of the term (even though the one in Schneider et al., 2010[2] is perhaps the most popular). The disagreement is not that much about the essence of the idea, which is rather consistent throughout the literature, but rather about finding one short and simple way to encapsulate all the diverse meanings behind the term. A few people argue that the concept is too complex to be defined but I don't find that argument convincing. Degrowth is not more difficult to define than the happiness of philosophers, the democracy of political scientists, or the space-time of physicists.

In its contemporary usage, the term degrowth has three dimensions: a critical theory, a transition strategy, and a utopia. To avoid unnecessary confusion, let's use different concepts for each: *objection to growth* (the critique), *degrowth* (the transition), and *post-growth* (the utopia). There are different strands of *objections to growth* (Schmelzer, 2022), but they all have in common that they take the critique of economic growth as a theoretical starting point. That's pretty straightforward. The two other terms, however, are a bit more sophisticated. In *Slow down or die* (2025), I define *degrowth* as "a downscaling of production and consumption to reduce ecological footprints, planned democratically in a way that is equitable while securing wellbeing" (for more details, see Defining degrowth, 2025). In the same book, I offer a similar, five-point definition for *post-growth*: "a steady-state in harmony with nature where decisions are made collectively and wealth is equitably shared, allowing us to prosper without growth"

So, one could say that degrowth stands for at least three things. First, a deconstruction of the hegemony of economic growth in modern politics – that's close to the "weak degrowth" and "GDP minimalism" approach embraced by Daniel Susskind (see Ch. 6 and 7). The second calls for something concrete: a planned slowdown of production and consumption for countries in ecological overshoot. The final demand has to do with the destination. Degrowth is a post-capitalist theory in the sense that it envisions an alternative economic system with radically different features (not-for-profit cooperatives, local currencies, commons, low-tech and convivial technologies, reduced working time, participatory decision-making protocols, etc.).

These three tactical angles share the same set of values. In Chapter 6 of my PhD thesis *The political economy of degrowth* (2019), I tried to capture the essence of degrowth in three values (autonomy, sufficiency, and care), which I operationalised into 15 principles of organisation.[3] In *The future is degrowth* (2022), one of my favourite syntheses of the literature, the authors decompose degrowth into six different typologies: 3 dimensions, 7 critiques of growth, 5 currents, 3 principles, 6 clusters of proposals, and 3 strategies for change (for a summary, see Parrique, 2022). There are a handful of other theories of degrowth[4]; the typologies are not exactly the same but the content pretty much is.

## Infinite growth on a finite planet?

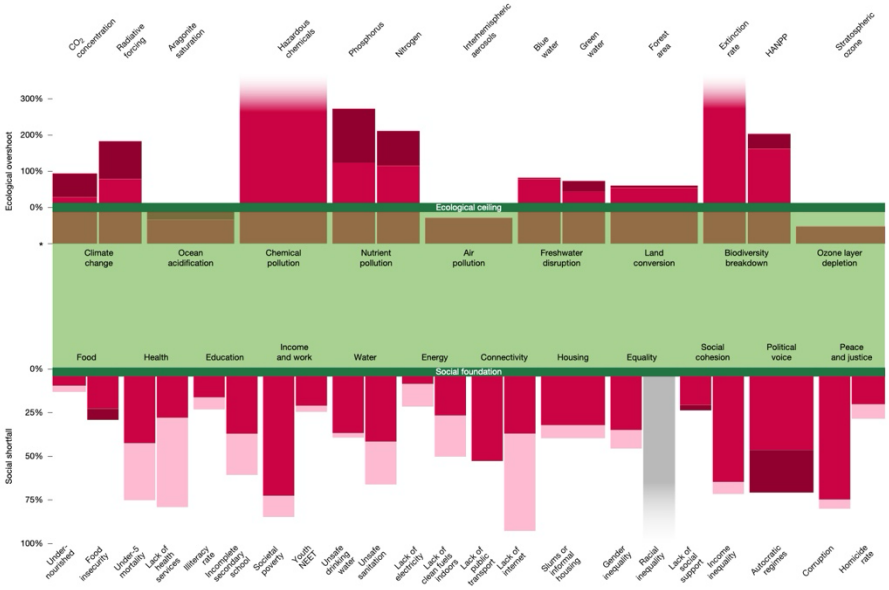
The green growth versus degrowth debate has two levels. The first is rather practical; it deals with the conditions that would allow countries in ecological overshoot to get back within planetary boundaries in the short term. The other debate is more long term and theoretical; it has to do with whether or not it's possible to have infinite growth on a finite planet.

The first mistake Daniel Susskind makes is to confuse the two. "Given the extraordinary technological changes that are underway, and the indeterminacy of what lies ahead, it feels deeply parochial to think that the last fifty years are likely to be a good guide to the next fifty thousand" (p.

222).[5] Arguing that degrowth is unnecessary today because green growth is theoretically possible would be like a doctor telling a sick patient that they don't need to stop smoking because some people can smoke without getting cancer. Perhaps some do but that argument is irrelevant to someone with cancerous lungs.

As the latest Planetary Health Check (2025, p. 11) concludes: "seven out of nine Planetary Boundaries have been breached, with all of those seven showing trends of increasing pressure – suggesting further deterioration and destabilization of planetary health in the near future." Another study that came out yesterday gives similar warnings: "the ten ecological indicators with available time-series data show a considerable worsening of conditions since the early 2000s. […] The median level of overshoot beyond the ecological ceiling increases from 75 % in 2000 to 96 % in 2022" (Fanning and Raworth, 2025, p. 2, see figure below). In case you didn't get the analogy, these are our cancerous lungs.

**Figure 1:** Ecological overshoot and social shortfall (Fanning and Raworth, 2025)




**Source** : Fanning and Raworth, 2025. Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries monitors a world out of balance, p. 3

"What if ten thousand years from now, for instance, our current physical world sits alongside trillions of virtual worlds, each of them full of simulated human minds, each with a virtual economy producing vast amounts of output" (p. 261). This makes for a good science-fiction scenario but it has little relevance today. Currently, no country in the world manages to achieve decent living standards without overshooting its planetary boundaries (Fanning et al., 2022; O'Neill, 2018) and no country has ever managed to decrease its total ecological footprint while growing its economy. That's the reality we should be concerned about. If a doctor diagnoses you with lung cancer, I doubt that the hypothetical possibility of 3D-printed organs being developed in 10 000 years will have an impact on your thinking and actions in the present.

Daniel Susskind calls for a "great decoupling" through a "renewable revolution" (Ch. 10), taking the example of solar energy. According to him, appropriate policies ("taxes and subsidies, laws and regulations, social narratives and norms" like a carbon tax[6]) could "spread incentives that redirect technological progress, pushing it away from dirty technologies towards cleaner ones" (p. 240). First, it's a common mistake to think that greening electricity is enough to make the global economy sustainable. Electricity only accounts for 20 % of global final energy consumption, the rest being mostly oil, gas, and coal (even in a highly electrified country like France, it's below 30 %). Besides, cheaper

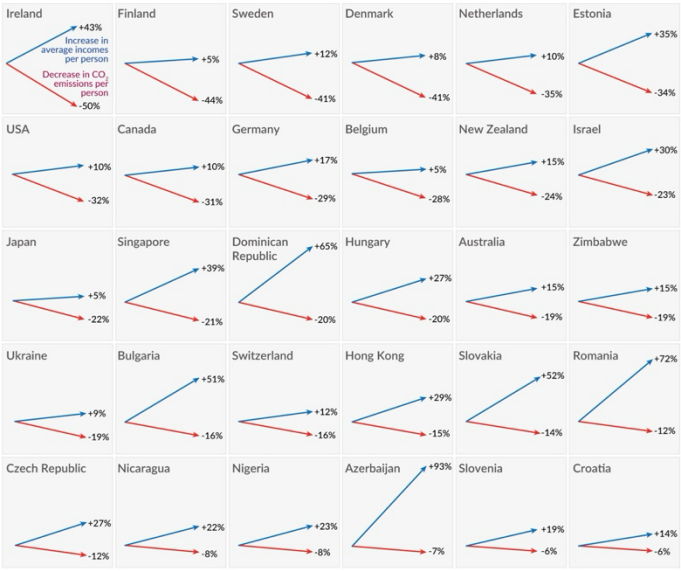
solar energy is no guarantee of phasing out fossil fuels – for more, see Brett Christophers's *The Price is Wrong: Why Capitalism Won't Save the Planet* (2022) and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz's *More and More and More: An All-Consuming History of Energy* (2025).

In less than a page, Daniel Susskind goes from a small, specific fact (the price of solar panels is decreasing) to a general, all-encompassing claim (it's possible to have "more growth in a healthier environment at the same time," p. 240). A classic case of faulty generalisation. Cheaper solar panels are not going to preserve biodiversity, avoid microplastic and antibiotic pollution, or halt deforestation. And it remains to be shown that the trends observed for solar energy – granted they're sufficiently fast and impactful – could happen for every single other relevant technology.

Like 99 % of economists who take a position on this debate, Daniel Susskind only talks about greenhouse gas emissions. This happens so often that it now has a name: "carbon tunnel vision." But let's not forget that we are dealing with a polycrisis with at least 9 planetary boundaries[7] and many more Earth system "tipping points." Dumbing down that complex problem into a one-dimensional puzzle is like solving only one face of a Rubik's Cube – easier, yes, but not a proper solution. Worse, non-systemic actions to cut emissions can mess up other faces of the cube. For instance, if we were to electrify our car fleet in its current scale, we would lower our carbon footprint but increase our material footprint (since electric vehicles require 2.3 times more minerals than conventional cars).

Even the part on carbon is unconvincing. Reproducing part of a 2021 figure from the online blog Our World in Data (see the full figure below), he hints at 25 countries that have supposedly reduced their emissions between 2005 and 2019 while increasing their GDP. This is a figure I have often debunked (e.g., 1, 2, 3). Without repeating myself here, let's just say that there is a problem of insufficient evidence. The decoupling debate spans over 30 years of literature and more than 1,000 empirical studies. If the only proof one can find is an old blog post, it says a lot about the solidity of the argument.

**Figure 2:** Decoupling between GDP and CO2 emissions (Ritchie, 2021)




**Source** : Ritchie, 2021. Many countries have decoupled economic growth from CO2 emissions, Our World in Data

In theory, I can imagine an economy running at carbon neutrality. Stop burning oil, gas, and coal, get rid of cows, reforest, and just power your economy with renewables. Yet, I cannot see how we could produce forever more while using forever less soil, water, biomass, metals, materials, and ecosystem

services and while generating forever less chemical pollution, micro-plastics, nuclear waste, deforestation, and species extinction. That's where I stand on the theoretical debate: I haven't found any convincing theory showing that green growth is possible without resorting to the joker card of technological progress (for more, see A response to Noah Smith, 2021).

Here, someone might object that the past doesn't define the future. But that statement doesn't hold much water when your deadline is only 5 or 10 years ahead. Not even the wildest engineer would dare predict a carbon-free commercial plane being invented before 2030, even less brought to market and actively used in replacement of all of today's planes (which, as a reminder, stay 20 to 25 years in use before retirement). The timing just doesn't work. If you want to cut the emission of aviation before 2030, you have no choice but to fly less. If you think this is an extreme example, look at these numbers. To get back within planetary boundaries before 2050, we need to reduce global emissions by -3.4% per year but, historically, they have been increasing by a yearly +3.1% between 2000 and 2022 – and achieving this U-turn seems relatively easy compared to other, more extreme trends (see table below).

**Figure 3:** Indicators of ecological overshoot (Fanning and Raworth, 2025)

| Dimension | Indicator (and planetary boundary) | Value (and % overshoot beyond boundary) | | Historical trend | To eliminate overshoot by 2050 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 2000–2001 | 2021–2022 | (%pt per year) | (%pt per year) |
| Climate change | Atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration, parts per million (at most 350 ppm $CO_2$) | 370 ppm (28%) | 416 ppm (94%) | +3.1** (worsening) | −3.4 |
| | Human-induced radiative forcing at the top of the atmosphere, Watt per square metre (at most 1 W $m^{-2}$) | 1.8 W $m^{-2}$ (78%) | 2.8 W $m^{-2}$ (183%) | +5.5** (worsening) | −6.5 |
| Ocean acidification | Average saturation state of aragonite at the ocean surface (at least 80% of pre-industrial saturation state of 3.44 $\Omega_{arag}$) | 2.99 $\Omega_{arag}$ (−34%) | 2.80 $\Omega_{arag}$ (−6%) | +1.3** (worsening) | (within boundary) |
| Chemical pollution | Production of hazardous chemicals, millions of tonnes per year (at most 5% of the 1,200 Mt of total chemicals produced in year 2000) | 933 Mt (1,455%) | 1,964 Mt (3,174%) | +81.8** (worsening) | −113 |
| Nutrient pollution | Phosphorus applied to land as fertilizer, millions of tonnes per year (at most 6.2 Mt per year) | 14 Mt (123%) | 23 Mt (273%) | +7.1** (worsening) | −9.7 |
| | Nitrogen applied to land as fertilizer, millions of tonnes per year (at most 62 Mt per year) | 134 Mt (116%) | 193 Mt (212%) | +4.6** (worsening) | −7.6 |
| Air pollution | Asymmetry between Earth's hemispheres of sunlight reaching the surface, owing to differences in atmospheric particle concentration (at most 0.1 inter-hemispheric difference in Aerosol Optical Depth) | 0.08 AOD (−29%) | 0.08 AOD (−29%) | – (not known) | (within boundary) |
| Freshwater disruption | Proportion of land area with human-induced disturbance of blue-water flow deviating from Holocene variability (at most 10.2%) | 18.2% dev. (78%) | 18.2% dev. (78%) | – (not known) | −2.7 |
| | Proportion of land area with root-zone soil moisture deviating from Holocene variability (at most 11.1%) | 15.9% dev. (43%) | 19.3% dev. (74%) | +2.5** (worsening) | −2.6 |
| Land conversion | Area of forested land as a proportion of forest-covered land before human alteration (at least 75% of 64 million square kilometres) | 39 $Mkm^2$ (55%) | 38 $Mkm^2$ (61%) | +0.3** (worsening) | −2.2 |
| Biodiversity breakdown | Rate of species extinctions per million species years (at most 10 E/MSY) | 100 E/MSY (900%) | 100 E/MSY (900%) | – (not known) | −32 |
| | Human appropriation of net primary productivity, billions of tonnes of carbon per year (at most 10% of 55.9 Gt C) | 15 Gt C (162%) | 17 Gt C (204%) | +2.0** (worsening) | −7.3 |
| Ozone-layer depletion | Concentration of ozone in the stratosphere, Dobson units (at most 5% decrease with respect to 1964–1980 value of 290 DU) | 283.0 DU (−50%) | 283.4 DU (−53%) | +0.1 (no change) | (within boundary) |

**Source** : Fanning and Raworth, 2025. Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries monitors a world out of balance, p. 6

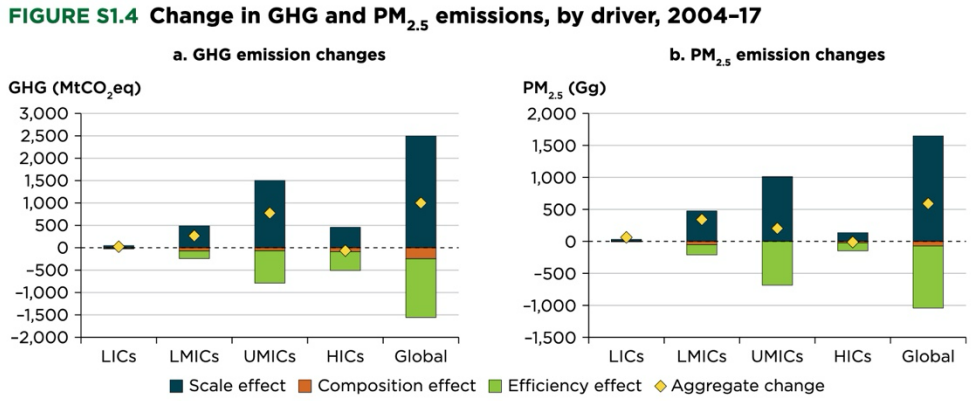
What troubles me most in *Growth: A Reckoning* is that the whole argument rests on faith in technological progress. "The infinite universe of ideas allows us to sidestep the constraints imposed by a finite planet" (p. 158).[8] That makes for a good mug quote but this is an incredibly risky strategy. Daniel Susskind has a spot-on analogy, comparing exponential growth to "the moment when the pilot of an interstellar spacecraft decides to engage 'hyperdrive' and an anxiety descends on the crew as they realize the slightest mistake at 'warp speed' could tear the craft to pieces" (p. 221). This is precisely what's happening today. The "great acceleration" in production of the last century (in short: economic growth) is tearing the planet into pieces and it's becoming more and more difficult to slalom between the asteroids.

Let's end on a point of agreement (I will repeat here what I already argued in A response to Hannah Ritchie, 2024). The resource-cutting measures advocated in the name of green growth are more likely to be effective in a smaller, non-growing economy compared to a situation where levels of production and consumption constantly increase. This is well explained in the "Decoupling

environmental degradation from economic growth," a chapter of *Reboot Development* (2025, pp. 19-32), the latest report on sustainability from the World Bank.

To lower an environmental footprint, you can act on *scale* (the volume of production and consumption), on *composition* (the type of goods and services), and on *efficiency* (the ecological intensity of these products). As the graph below shows (for both greenhouse gas – GHG – emissions and fine particulate matter – $PM_{2.5}$), the scale effect (economic growth) pushes emissions up while the composition and efficiency effects pull them down. In high-income countries (HICs), the two forces almost cancel each other out, which explains why the decrease in emissions is so small.

**Figure 4:** Decomposition analysis (World Bank, 2025)




**Source** : World Bank, *Reboot Development*, 2025, p. 27 (data from GTAP)

What degrowth tries to do is to harness the power of scale (in addition to composition and efficiency) in order to cut emissions much faster. Usually, it's at this moment in the discussion that opponents concede that, indeed, degrowth is a fast, fail-safe way of lowering an environmental footprint, but that it doesn't matter because it's socially undesirable.

## A recession with a human face?

"[I]t is unfortunate that the degrowthers are so defensive when people say that they are calling for deliberate recessions. As a matter of public relations, that reaction is understandable. But there is also something disappointing about it, because their call for recessions in fact captures the uniqueness of what they are trying to do" (p. 169). I think that's a valuable communication tip. As I argue in *Defining degrowth* (2025), the unavoidable core of degrowth is a downscaling of economic activities.

If you cannot sufficiently decouple GDP from environmental pressures and if you want to achieve a large reduction in ecological footprints, then it means that your economy has to contract. There is no way out of it. You might call it a slowdown, a contraction, or a recession and add as many reassuring adjectives to it as you want, but you cannot escape from the fact that your economy – both in monetary and biophysical terms – will get smaller. "[T]he term 'recession' is just the technical label for a period where economic activity declines, nothing more or less," explains Daniel Susskind. "It has

nothing to do with any other features – good outcomes, noble intentions – that might or might not accompany an economic downturn" (p. 161).

But that does not mean that degrowth is only a recession. One shortcoming of this debate is that it's too black and white: growth good / degrowth bad (or the opposite, depending on your ideological position). However, growth is an aggregated, macroeconomic phenomenon, and there more more desirable kinds of growth than others. What applies in pluses also applies in minuses. Certain recessions are worse than others and degrowth is a concept that describes a hypothetical recession with social-ecological benefits.

This is why I like the analogy of a macroeconomic diet to get back into ecological health. In my definition of degrowth, I decided to use the term "downscaling," which is a more precise term than "reduction," "contraction," or "shrinking" because it implies that the goal is to fall back under a certain threshold, what the ecological economist Herman Daly compared to a plimsoll line, the reference mark on a ship's hull indicating the maximum depth to which a boat can be safely submerged. Daniel Susskind should appreciate the maritime analogy since he himself uses it: "picture the economy as a boat bobbing about on the open water, with policymakers at the helm. They can raise the sails to speed up, or lower them to slow down […] but they can also steer their craft wherever they please on the sea" (p. 208). The two metaphors work well together. A boat (an economy) can go anywhere (in terms of what it can produce and consume) except if it sinks (by overshooting the biocapacity of its ecosystems leading to their collapse).

One could say that degrowth is a preventive, controlled recession in order to avoid another, more damaging and chaotic crash. It's akin to throwing some furniture overboard to avoid sinking the ship. We now know that the collapse of ecosystems will have significant consequences on economic activities. A recent study estimates that the costs of already-occurring climate change will eat up 19 % of global GDP in the next 26 years, which is six times more than what it would have cost to avoid such a warming. This is now a consensus view: the costs of action are lower than the costs of inaction.

Degrowth is "akin to driving down a road, knocking over an animal, and reversing back over the corpse to try and fix the problem" (p. 248), writes Daniel Susskind. But I don't think the analogy works. The way I see it, degrowth is just a prudent slowdown in order to avoid running over nature. And to be exact, one should add "before nature runs over us," because that's the real threat. The 2008 financial meltdown, the Greek debt crisis, the Covid lockdown, all of that will be considered cute and fun the day water will run out, insects will cease to pollinate our crops, and temperatures will reach killer heat.

Better slower by design than by disaster, would say Canadian macroeconomist Peter Victor. The challenge is to find a way of contracting the economy without crashing it. Worktime reduction schemes and job guarantees to avoid unemployment, fiscal reforms to weaken growth dependencies, monetary reforms to finance the transition, redistributive mechanisms to keep inequality in check – these are examples of *degrowth policies*, proposals that could enable a smooth slowdown (or at least smoother compared to a situation without any prior planning).

Forget about GDP. What really matters is that the foundational economy remains intact. What we economists should care about is that energy, materials, adequate labour, and social-ecological infrastructure remain available in order to provide for human needs. In that sense, avoiding ecological collapse is a necessary step to maintain a functioning provisioning system. In Chapter 4: The promise, Daniel Susskind makes an inventory of all the "dazzling range of measures of wellbeing and progress" growth appears to be correlated with. He mentions health, education, leisure time, tax revenues, and lighting (yeah, that last one comes a bit out of nowhere). Point is: all of these things will be more difficult to achieve in a world crippled with environmental crises.

Degrowth might be difficult but there is one element that makes it much easier than it could potentially be: it mainly concerns already-rich nations. Indeed, to be effective, the slowdown should happen in regions with large overshoot, which happens to be mostly high-income countries (see, for example, Fanning et al., 2022). In a highly unequal world where poverty remains (Fanning and Raworth, 2025), these are places where growth is the least needed. Daniel Susskind tries to show – in less than five paragraphs (pp. 86-88) – that "the conventional wisdom that growth does not make us happier is probably wrong." But, like in the case of decoupling, he doesn't provide sufficient evidence to back up his claim. In fact, he only references four studies from 2008, 2012, and 2013, three of them by the same pair of authors. In such a booming and disputed field of research, this looks like suspicious cherry-picking, especially when studies have recently moved from a sole concern with life satisfaction (like in the original Easterlin study in 1974) to more complex ranges of indicators of quality of life.[9]

And let's forget about income for a second. Can you think of a single need that is not bounded by a threshold of satiation? You need enough medicine when you get sick, enough teachers to obtain a decent education, enough floor space to feel comfortable at home, etc. If the *raison d'être* of an economy is to satisfy needs, and if these needs are bounded, then one should expect an economy to slow down as it reaches maturity. You need bullets during a war and masks during a pandemic, but there is no point aiming for a steady 2% yearly growth of them forever. The economy is a means, not and end. And in that sense, an economy can indeed be "fully grown" with stagnation being a sign of success.

## A lack of imagination?

"One of the degrowth movement most frustrating characteristics," writes Daniel Susskind is "its lack of imagination" (p. 165). This is a strange argument and, to understand why, allow me a little personal detour. Before getting interested in sustainability, I studied economics. Very quickly, I got interested in political economy, economic history, and the history of economic thought, fields I found much more intellectually stimulating than modern micro- and macroeconomics.

Reading outside-of-the-curriculum authors like Alessandro Roncaglia, Marshall Sahlins, Fernand Braudel, or David Graeber, I got a taste of how creative human societies can be in the ways they organise economic life. I still remember how shocked (and disappointed) I was during my first course in Comparative Political Economy where a professor presented us with a triad supposedly encompassing all possible economic systems: capitalism, socialism, or developing countries that have not yet chosen between the two.

Let's say it out loud: economics is experiencing a failure of collective imagination. I borrow the term from a group of economists at the London School of Economics who, in 2009, had to justify themselves to the Queen after she asked why no one had seen the financial crisis coming. The experts' response: "The failure to foresee the timing, scale, and severity of the crisis and to prevent it, although it has many causes, is mainly due to the *failure of the collective imagination* of many brilliant people, both in this country and abroad, to understand the risks to the system as a whole" (italics added).

There are many brilliant researchers, each specializing in their own field of study, but few are able to think about the system as a whole. The metaphor of the blind zoologists and the elephant becomes the one of economists and the economy: each touches a single part without being able to define the whole. Not only does this make us unable to predict systemic crises but it also prevents us from imagining economic systems that are radically different from the one we already have.

I divide my time between reading traditional economics and growth-critical theories and the difference is striking. While environmental economists keep discussing the carbon tax, the one single innovation that came out of the field since the 1970s, heterodox scholars have been inventing a diversity

of never-heard-before solutions: commoning, alternative monies, defashion, universal care income, ecological transition income, universal basic services, local job guarantee, not-for-profit businesses, etc. The degrowth literature has many flaws but a lack of imagination is not one of them.

"The result is an oddly conservative view of the future: they [advocates of degrowth] seem happy to settle for the familiar mediocrity of the world we happen to have inherited, resign ourselves to indefinitely shuffling around our present economic lot rather than reach for the unfamiliar but extraordinary possibilities that lies in wait" (p. 165). In his book *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care* (2019, p. 3), the degrowth theorist Giorgos Kallis gives the perfect answer to this argument, using a quote from the film *The Legend of 1900* (1998): "The keys begin, the keys end. You know there are 88 of them. They are not infinite, you are infinite. On those 88 keys the music that you can make is infinite." Would you call modern pianists like Martha Argerich or Jacob Collier "conservative" because they still play on an 88-key piano, an object they "happen to have inherited" from the past? Of course not. Contemporary pianists don't "resign themselves to indefinitely shuffling around" with 88 keys, they are, on the contrary, using the limitedness of the keys to deploy their creativity. Adding an 89$^{th}$ key to a piano is not innovation, it is the very opposite: a cheap technical fix to make up for a lack of musical imagination.

**Figure 5:** The Legend of 1900 (1998)


As an environmentally grounded theory, degrowth acknowledges the existence of biophysical limits. But this finitude must not necessarily translate into social stagnation. It is precisely because natural resources are limited that we must show creativity in the way we use them. Bizarre ideas like energy-backed currencies, frequent flyer levies, or food social security should be considered tremendous feats of imagination at a time where it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The lazy solution of mining asteroids to get more materials to continue growing as usual is just like adding an 89$^{th}$ key to a piano.

After reading such a critique, I was eagerly waiting for the author's own creative solution to the problem. It came at the end of the book: "we can shape the direction of technological progress, and with it change the nature of economic growth" (p. 225). Daniel Susskind wants to do that with "taxes and subsidies, laws and regulations, social narratives and norms" (a catchphrase he incants throughout

the book, unfortunately without ever getting into too much detail).[10] For ecological sustainability, the only thing he offers is – surprise surprise – a carbon tax, which he considers "and obvious starting point – and if large enough, possible ending point" (p. 241). All of that teasing just to say – or rather, repeat – that one must 'internalise externalities'[11] to harness the power of technological progress?

That's disappointing. Daniel Susskind doesn't offer a solution; he just says that we should be working harder on finding solutions (his definition of technological progress). This is like trying to lose weight by writing more nutrition books. Is this not, after all, the ultimate resignation? Just passing the ball to future generations hoping they'll do better than us. This sounds like a cop-out. If, like Daniel Susskind, we believe in the "innovative genius of humankind" (p. 272), why not just use it right now? We're humans, we can have ideas now, and some of them (like degrowth) are more powerful than we think.

## Is degrowth impossible?

Degrowth "would be impossible to achieve in the real world" (p. 166), affirms Daniel Susskind. There is a grain of truth here. I cannot think of many places where a politician would get elected championing degrowth. To be fair, the problem is not about degrowth per se but rather about the unpopularity of ecology in general. Nowadays, any candidate putting sustainability first is likely to be cancelled.

Luckily, there is a life beyond statecraft. What we should pay attention to are the many initiatives of "degrowth in practice" (see, for example, Ch. 3 in *Exploring degrowth*), "the diverse ways activists have pursued degrowth by living simply; experimenting with alternative technologies and techniques for living and self-provisioning; forming political squats and social centres; campaigning against mega-infrastructure developments; experimenting with alternative currencies and non-monetary economies; developing action-based experiential methods and methodologies."

Degrowth sounds impossible as a grand project until you decompose it into smaller actions. Giving up meat, closing down an airport, banning advertising, taxing extreme wealth, criminalising planned obsolescence, launching local currencies, organising citizen assemblies, setting up not-for-profit cooperatives, etc. (for a full list, see Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). This is not science-fiction. All of these things exist today and what is being explored in the degrowth literature is a scenario where many of them would be enacted together, with or without the support of the state.

Back in 2019, I titled the conclusion of the policy design part of my PhD thesis "a realistic demand for the impossible," arguing that degrowth was a constructive utopia, an impossible goal worth having because it broadens the window of possibility.[12] Degrowth is what Martin Luther King called "creative maladjustment," a refusal to adjust to a reality one finds absurd. And this is precisely the task that falls upon us: turning the inconceivable of today into the commonsense of tomorrow.

"If Jesus himself could not convince everyone to give up their material possessions – in the words of Matthew 19:24, 'Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God' – then it is unlikely that degrowthers will be able to do it either" (p. 167). Inequality is a good example of the impossible turning possible. Rewind a century or two, and the idea of economic equality was as utopian as it gets (in fact, the term "utopia" was created in 1516 when Thomas More envisioned a society without inequality). Today in France, redistributive mechanisms manage to narrow down inequality in living standards from a ratio of 1-to-18 before redistribution to a ratio of only 1-to-3. This is a spectacular story of social innovation (and no, economic growth has nothing to do with it).

In social systems, the notion of impossibility can quickly shift. For a long time, it was considered impossible for a central bank to inject money into the economy. But in 2001, the Bank of

Japan started doing so and, today, quantitative easing has become a mainstream policy tool. Excluding certain public spending from the Maastricht debt was for long considered impossible. But with the return of war in Europe, an exception is being made for defence expenditures.

Daniel Susskind mentions the Covid crisis several times in the book, which he sees as an example of rapid technological progress (he speaks about the development of vaccines). I feel the same but about social innovation instead. Many things once thought impossible became possible during the pandemic: lockdowns, rationing of medical equipment, wearing masks in public, etc. What we discovered during Covid is that, when it comes to social organisation, pretty much anything is possible (for better or for worse). So, why are we not applying the same ambition to tackling ecological crises?

Let's get back to the smoking analogy. Here is the choice we have. We can try to quit smoking (that's degrowth). This is impossible in a hyperbolic sense; we could do it but it's extremely difficult, and therefore rather unlikely. Or we can hope for a technical solution that might never materialise (that's green growth). In choosing between the two, I think we should side with the most probable impossible.

## Conclusion

"The pursuit of growth is a new, mysterious and dangerous activity for humankind," concludes Daniel Susskind (p. 270). He's right and I think *Growth: A Reckoning* (2023) is successful in showing how little we know about the nature and causes of economic growth. What I find troubling in his attitude is how little proof he brings to back up some of his claims. Green growth is happening because one figure on a blog post says so and it will continue forever because solar panels are getting cheaper. The Easterlin paradox is wrong because two authors in 2008 said it was. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence and, unfortunately, this book is full of the former but short on the latter. Given the gravity of the present situation, we should be very careful about what we think we know about growth. If I'm wrong about degrowth, then you can kick-start the economy back again to continue growing business-as-usual.[13] If Daniel Susskind is wrong, on the other hand, it will cost us the biosphere.

## Notes

[1] To discover the growth-critical scholarship, I recommend these two review articles (Kallis et al., 2025; Kallis et al., 2019), the book *The future is degrowth* (2022), or my PhD thesis *The political economy of degrowth* (2019) and its adaptation in book format as *Slow down or die. The economics of degrowth* (2025).

[2] "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." (Schneider et al., 2010, pp. 512-13)

[3] The 15 principles are: resource sovereignty, sustainability, circularity, socially useful production, small not-for-profit cooperatives, proximity, convivial tools, postwork, value sovereignty, commons, gratuity, sharing, voluntary simplicity, relational goods, and joie de vivre (see *The political economy of degrowth*, 2019, pp. 272-315).

[4] For example, Latouche, 2006; Flipo, 2007; Demaria et al., 2013; Lievens, 2015; Kallis, 2018: 118-123; Abraham, 2019; Parrique, 2019: Chap 6 – for a review of different theories of degrowth, see Parrique (2019, pp. 237-244).

[5] Daniel Susskind uses this joker twice. Not only can technological progress infinitely increase general productivity but it also applies to the productivity of the researchers themselves. "[T]he productivity of researchers – like the productivity of any worker – can vary. And most importantly, there is no theoretical limit to how productive a researcher could be in the future, how quickly they might be able to come up with more ideas in the centuries to come" (p. 195). Technological progress applies to itself which ensures an infinite loop of exponential improvement.

[6] For the author, a carbon tax would be "an obvious starting point – and if large enough, a possible ending point" (p. 241).

[7] Here are the nine planetary boundaries: Ozone depletion, aerosol loading, ocean acidification, freshwater change, land system change, climate change, modification of biogeochemical flows like phosphorus and nitrogen, introduction of novel entities, and change in biosphere integrity.

[8] "The planet of tangible resources may be finite, and if these resources were all that counted for growth then we would indeed be heading towards deep economic trouble. But they are not all that matters. In fact, what really matters for growth are the intangible ideas for combining these resources in new and valuable ways" (p. 157).

[9] Two examples of recent studies on the link between income and well-being: Fanning and O'Neill (2019) and Steinberger et al. (2020). See also Fanning and Raworth (2025) for a sophisticated set of wellbeing indicators.

[10] The author offers four solutions to generate more growth: (1) changing intellectual property regime, (2) investing more in research and development, (3) encouraging immigration and reducing inequality of opportunities, and (4) developing more technologies (like computers that could semi-autonomously do research). In short: "improvements in the IP regime and more resources, people and technology devoted to R&D" (p. 202).

[11] "Prices must be influenced (at times gently nudged, at other times forcefully cajoled) to close the gap between the market value they capture when left to their own devices and the social value they neglect" (p. 218).

[12] "Is degrowth unrealistic? Yes, it is and it should be. Simply put, if it is considered *possible*, then it is not degrowth. If it were to sound even remotely possible to the broader public, then it would probably be the sign that it is not revolutionary enough. Of course, it is not actually impossible, as the diversity of alternative practices that I have presented attest, but only appears to be so. Impossibility is the defining mark of all utopias. Degrowthers can be called utopian only because they explore the borders of the unimaginable. They think and act as if it was possible for degrowth to exist and through opposition and brave leaps of social eccentricity, they create the conditions of its own feasibility. Degrowth is, in that sense, an impossible goal but an impossible goal worth having" (*The political economy of degrowth*, 2019, p. 698).

[13] Degrowth comes with its own political, social, and economic challenges, which is another discussion altogether, but it has the benefits of being reversible. Anything we scale back today is something we can possibly resume producing in the future if new, cleaner technology allows it. Today, there are no ways of flying without emitting greenhouse gases, hence the need to fly less if we want to reduce the emissions of aviation. But if, at some point in the future, someone invents a new low-emission, low-material, low-everything plane, then we can start flying more again.

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