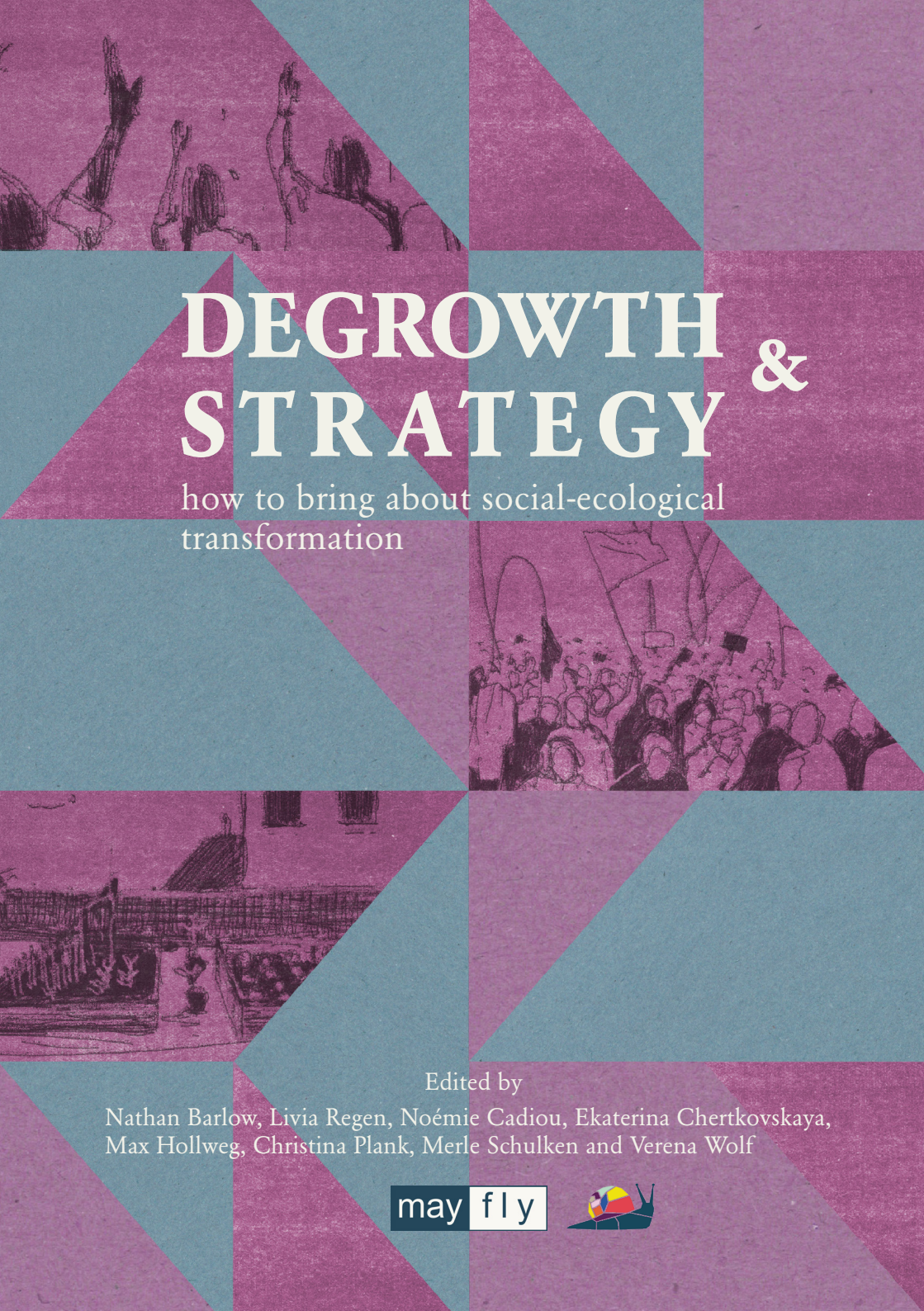


DEGROWTH & STRATEGY

how to bring about social-ecological
transformation



Edited by

Nathan Barlow, Livia Regen, Noémie Cadiou, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya,
Max Hollweg, Christina Plank, Merle Schulken and Verena Wolf

may fly



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Praise for this book

“This book is what the degrowth movement needed the most: a well-reasoned and empirically grounded compendium of strategic thinking and praxis for systemic transformations. This is a true gift, not only to degrowthers, but to all those who understand the need for radical change. In an era of unprecedented challenges as the one we are living through, this book should become essential reading in every higher-education course across the social sciences and humanities.”

Stefania Barca, University of Santiago de Compostela, author of *Forces of Reproduction – Notes for a Counterhegemonic Anthropocene*

“Emerging amidst the ruins of the destroyed (some call it developed) world, degrowth is a powerful call for transformation towards justice and sustainability. This book takes degrowth’s ideological basis towards strategy and practice, relates it to other movements, and shows pathways that are crucial for the Global North to take if life on earth has to flourish again.”

Ashish Kothari, co-author of *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*

“The book is an exciting source of hope for degrowth futures. It is a thoroughly readable and ambitious book that sets out what degrowth wants to do and what it is actually achieving. It contains many inspiring examples of new ways of living together, illustrating how to share resources, create caring institutions, fair infrastructures, and new ways of relating to humans and more-than-humans.”

Wendy Harcourt, International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam

“In contrast to previous works on the topic the focus is firmly placed on the challenge of how to achieve social-ecological transformation in the face of economic structures and powerful vested interests committed to a utopian vision of sustaining economic growth without end; a vision that pretends to be concerned for the poor while exploiting them and destroying Nature. An alternative multi-faceted vision is outlined in the most comprehensive exploration of the topic available, including addressing the role of money, mobility, energy, food, technology, housing, and most importantly how to change modernity’s various growth-obsessed social-economic systems.”

Clive Spash, Vienna University of Economics and Business, editor of *Handbook of Ecological Economics: Nature & Society*

“We live in times of great despair and danger, but also great promise. This book is the perfect gateway to strategy and action for our time, written by some of the very top thinkers in the degrowth movement. It will help you create possibilities to transform our world for the better.”

Julia Steinberger, University of Lausanne

“This is a book everyone in the degrowth community has been waiting for. Moving beyond the diagnosis about the costs and limits of growth, this volume asks the question of what is to be done and puts forward an ambitious political program of how we go from here to there. The authors present a coherent vision of how different mobilisations at different scales can come together and steer societies to what now seems politically impossible – degrowth.”

Giorgos Kallis, ICREA Professor, ICTA-UAB, author of *Limits and The Case for Degrowth*

“What is to be done about the Global North? Young economists of the degrowth generation share strategies on food, housing, energy, transport, technology, and money. Practical, stimulating, and provocative.”

Ariel Salleh, author of *Eco-Sufficiency & Global Justice*

“How do we go from here to there? Read this book and you will find how societies can undertake a transformation towards degrowth.”

Federico Demaria, University of Barcelona, co-author of *The Case for Degrowth*

“Above all, *Degrowth & Strategy* is a work of revolutionary optimism. The range of visions offered in this text teaches us that we are better off finding a common ground in our strategies and tactics than dwelling on our differences, so that we may step into the future together. With this text, the degrowth movement shifts its central focus from the what and the why to the how. Be warned: this is for those to whom degrowth is an everyday commitment and not a mere thought exercise!”

Jamie Tyberg, co-founder and member of DegrowNYC

“*Degrowth & Strategy* is an important collection of essays on a subject of the greatest significance and urgency. Particularly impressive is the emphasis on public communication, workable political strategies and practical solutions.”

Amitav Ghosh, author of *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

“The most critical challenge is *implementing* degrowth – to ensure that production and consumption meet basic needs, neither more (waste) nor less (poverty). This collection confronts *strategy* head-on, with a singular unity of purpose and a rich variety of approaches. A must-read for all concerned about our uncertain future.”

Anitra Nelson, University of Melbourne (Australia), co-author of *Exploring Degrowth*, and co-editor of *Food for Degrowth and Housing for Degrowth*

“This book makes a timely and essential contribution to a number of intersecting debates regarding the *how* of social-ecological transformation. Expertly edited, the book’s emphasis on philosophies, struggles and strategies in more ‘in principle’ terms complements very effectively the consideration of concrete practices across a wide range of societal sites and sectors. A must-read for scholars and activists alike.”

Ian Bruff, University of Manchester

“That we need to move to a degrowth economy is becoming ever more obvious. How we go about achieving it has hitherto been less clear, and less discussed in degrowth literature. This comprehensive and astute survey of transformative strategies, both those already in train and those that need to come into force, provides an essential guide.”

Kate Soper, London Metropolitan University

“Nothing grows forever, and the same is true of economies. In this urgently needed book, an impressive group of academics and activists consider how we get to an economic system that operates within natural limits and with regard to social justice. Illustrated with inspiring case studies, the authors focus on the *how*, because the planet and our natural world are already showing us the *why*.”

Martin Parker, Bristol University, author of *Shut Down the Business School*

“The structural, cultural and ideational barriers to degrowth have long been recognised by its advocates. Contributors to this collection respond to the challenges positively and creatively by thinking about strategy and how this concept can be harnessed by diverse social movements to initiate, inspire and institute bottom-up social-ecological change.”

Ruth Kinna, Loughborough University

“We need to go beyond envisioning degrowth but identify pathways towards it. This is the first book that provides a comprehensive and in-depth engagement with strategies for degrowth, definitely leading us closer to a degrowth future. Required reading for anyone who aims to realise degrowth.”

Jin Xue, Norwegian University of Life Sciences

“The Western growth model becomes increasingly untenable as a societal project, thereby urging communities, researchers, and decision-makers to find alternative pathways. To guide us through these turbulent times and towards a future beyond growth, the authors of *Degrowth & Strategy* provide a much-needed map – unprecedented in detail but also aware of the yet unknown.”

Benedikt Schmid, University of Freiburg, author of *Making Transformative Geographies*

“How can we better organise to achieve social and ecological justice in a finite world? This is a big question with no easy answer. In an honest and thoughtful way, this book brings multiple voices expressing diverse pathways to pursue social-ecological transformation. What emerges from the presentation of different perspectives and strategies is not the suggestion of one right way to bring about change but a healthy, pluralistic, thought-provoking and respectful dialogue that can lead us in new and promising directions.”

Ana Maria Peredo, Professor of Social and Inclusive Entrepreneurship, University of Ottawa & Professor of Political Ecology, University of Victoria

“In my classes, students keep circling back to the question – how do we move from the current world driven by the logic of capital, endless growth, needless production and consumption to a world that centres on justice, care, and living well in a way that amplifies life? This book provides what so many of us are craving for – thought-provoking engagement with the issue of strategies for materialising social-ecological transformation. The book offers theoretical frameworks, pathways, and practical examples of diverse strategies for social-ecological transformations at work. It is a must-read for academics, activists, practitioners, and ordinary people striving for an equitable and sustainable world. I am grateful to the editors and authors for creating this excellent resource for thinking and acting to facilitate a ‘strategic assemblage for degrowth?’”

Neera Singh, Geography & Planning, University of Toronto

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Chapter 4:

Strategising within diversity: the challenge of structuring

By Viviana Asara

Introduction

The concept of degrowth refers to at least three interconnected analytical objects or levels of meaning⁸. First, degrowth is a political project and a (concrete) utopia (Muraca 2013) with a set of ideas and imaginaries about what an alternative society is to be, and a critique of current (growth-centred, capitalist) societies. Second, degrowth has a movement dimension: while for some it is itself an emerging social movement (Burkhart, Schmelzer, and Treu 2020; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018, 246; Martínez-Alier *et al.* 2010), for others it is rather “an interpretative frame” (Demaria *et al.* 2013) or even an “archipelago” (Muraca 2020, 4–5) for the convergence of different movements. Here, two similar concepts borrowed from social movement studies can help us understand this movement dimension. One is the concept of the “movement area” introduced by sociologist Alberto Melucci back in the 1980s⁹, namely “networks composed of a multiplicity of groups that are dispersed, fragmented, and submerged in everyday life, and which act as cultural laboratories” (Melucci 1989, 60). This concept emphasises collective action that is mainly engaged in *latent* movement activities – such as the experimentation and practice of new cultural models, forms of relationships, and meanings of the world – characterised by multiple forms of memberships and only periodical contentious

8 I thank Emanuele Leonardi for suggesting this threefold distinction during our conversations. Furthermore, this distinction is similar to the one highlighted by Chertkovskaya 2022.

9 I thank Laura Centemeri for having raised this point during our conversations.

mobilisation (Melucci 1984). The concept of “social movement community” (Staggenborg 1998) is also useful in that it stresses that “community” is forged through social networks and a movement culture created through the overlapping participation of individuals in diverse movements with similar values (i.e., the alter/anti-globalization movement, feminist movement, environmental and climate justice movements, solidarity economy movements etc.).

Finally, born at the intersection between a culturalist and ecological critique of economics (Latouche 2011), degrowth’s third level of meaning has increasingly involved the development of an interdisciplinary field of investigation and can now be considered to be a research paradigm, interlacing disciplines from ecological economics, social ecology, and political ecology to anthropology, sociology, and political science and economy, among others (Kallis *et al.* 2018; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017).

This multi-perspectival approach suggests that the degrowth community and worldviews hold some substantial degree of heterogeneity and diversity, as is often remarked by degrowth authors. For example, Barca *et al.* (2019, 5) argue that degrowth’s key strength is its multiplicity of ideas and movements, and that it should further embrace a “nomadic utopianism” which, by proceeding through a non-hierarchical organisation, maximises difference and benefits from a pluriverse of possible worlds and self-critiques. But how is such a difference articulated? And, more importantly, if the degrowth movement aims to have any impact on social and political systems, how can a strategic plan be devised in the face of plurality?

In this chapter, I will scrutinise the range and features of degrowth’s plurality and, using a lens of social movement theory, discuss what movements’ internal diversity and intersectionality might involve in terms of collective identity and transformative potential. Furthermore, I will delve into the multi-dimensionality of strategy, arguing that the fostering of strategic thinking and decision-making cannot prescind from dealing with the movement’s

organisational structure. I will situate this argument within the degrowth movement's recent history, and show that the movement is facing a critical juncture, reflecting on some weaknesses and potential ways forward.

This chapter's findings draw, first, on my own experience as a participant in the degrowth movement as both an "activist" – as a member of the association Research & Degrowth since 2011, of the Support Group for only a few months in 2013, and of the Advisory Board of the *Degrowth Vienna 2020 Conference: Strategies for Social-ecological Transformation* – as well as an academic that has participated in six international degrowth conferences. Second, the findings have been substantially enriched by an interview carried out with an activist, Jean-Louis Aillon, deeply involved in the degrowth movement at both the national (in the Italian *Movimento per la Decrescita Felice*) and international scale (as a member of the Support Group).

Plurality in degrowth

The degrowth movement's diversity has been investigated empirically. Eversberg and Schmelzer (2018) conducted a survey at the 4th *International Degrowth Conference in Leipzig* (2014), drawing on a sample of 814 respondents out of more than 3000 conference participants. While the sample is not representative of the entire degrowth community, it provides an idea of the diversity inherent in the movement and I believe is useful for grasping some main cleavages and tensions cutting across the degrowth community. The survey identified five different and even conflicting currents within the movement : 1) a group of Critics of Civilisation, who have a radical ecological and sufficiency-oriented approach, and hold a very negative view of industrial contemporary society as incapable of being reformed, thus focusing on building small-scale and frugal alternative local community projects; 2) a pragmatic and moderate group of Immanent Reformers, with an optimistic stance on technology and progress and a pragmatic take on politics,

believing that changes should be pursued within existing institutions rather than by means of individual behaviour; 3) a younger and weakly politicised cluster of voluntarist-pacifist idealists, probably transitory due to their young age, who see degrowth as a peaceful and voluntary process; 4) a group of classical Modernist-Rationalist Leftists, privileging just distribution rather than ecological issues, and oriented towards an understanding of transformative change based on strategic considerations (rather than on ethical grounds) by means of classical mass organisations and socialist policies; 5) a particularly militant Alternative Practical Left group displaying a fierce critique of capitalism and industrial civilisation, with the belief that the necessary transformation will require a decisive rupture with existing societal structures. This latter group combines a radical critique of society with a practice of experimenting with possible alternatives, inspired by anarchist thought. Based on their cluster analysis, the authors note that while the two most ideologically divided positions are clusters 1 and 4, the fifth group seems to occupy a mediating position between them because its “radical views criss-cross the divide between a wholesale critique of civilisation on the one hand and a rationalist-progressive position on the other” (*Ibid.*, 263).

The tension between more classical left/Marxist currents and more anarchic strands seems indeed to be one that is cutting across the degrowth community. On the one hand, degrowth is conspicuously inspired by an anarchist subculture and tradition that “rely on self-organisation from the bottom-up” (Burkhart *et al.* 2019, 10) and stresses “the need for a voluntary and democratic downshift” (Cosme *et al.* 2017, 327). Often this influence is explicit at international conferences. For example, anarchism was one of the thematic strands of the 8th *International Degrowth Conference in The Hague* (2021). On the other hand, as shown by a review of academic works published in peer-reviewed journals (Cosme *et al.* 2017), the majority of degrowth proposals “require direct control by governments (e.g., caps, taxes, and regulations), which suggests the need for a high level of state

intervention to pursue a degrowth transition” (*Ibid.*, 327). D’Alisa (2019) sees in this paradox a bifurcation between two approaches that are currently bringing life into the degrowth camp, one dedicated to practice (such as alternative economies) and the other to policies (such as basic income, work-sharing etc.), and reads these two factions as embodying Erik Olin Wright’s interstitial and symbiotic strategies for transformation beyond capitalism (see also Chapter 8).

Other degrowth authors have drawn on Wright’s categories (see e.g., Chapter 2 this volume; Asara 2020a) to stress that complementarity between different ideological positions can be found. Indeed, for Wright, interstitial transformations are associated with some strands of anarchism, ruptural strategies with Leninism and, more generally, revolutionary communism and socialism, and symbiotic strategies are associated with social democracy (Wright 2010). However, this complementarity cannot be taken for granted. It is noteworthy, for example, that the meaning of “ruptural” strategies becomes quite different when read through an anarchist-inspired lens (see Chapter 2) or from the perspective of Marxist/classical left tradition, which is more consonant with Wright’s (2019, 2010) meaning of “ruptural” as the Leninist strategic logic of “smashing capitalism” that Wright attributes to revolutionaries.

At the 6th *International Degrowth Conference in Malmö* (2018), this tension between different ideological positions was manifested in a heated plenary (MalmoDegrowth 2018) where the discussion increasingly drifted from the planned topic of a dialogue between different knowledges to the “hot” topics of political strategies and ideologies not heretofore debated at previous degrowth conferences (see Table 5.1 in Chapter 5). One of the panellists, Andreas Malm – in his first participation in a degrowth conference – advocated for a politics of vanguardism and what he called “ecological Leninism” and “war communism”, with a strong role of the state forcing through unpopular policies such as mandatory veganism. This created some strong reactions from the audience – with some people clapping and several protesting – including the intervention of Miriam Lang,

which pointed to the limits of “Leninist” progressive governments during the Latin American pink tide. Malm responded that these governments were akin to social democracy rather than revolutionary socialism or oppositional communism. In his latest book (Malm 2020), he deepened these arguments, arguing that in today’s chronic (climate) emergency hard state power is required, starting with “draconian restraints and cuts”, including economic plans, covering all branches of economic activities, and nothing less than ecological war communism (*Ibid.*, 46). An ecological Leninism for Malm is the “only one that can point to an emergency exit”, foregrounding “speed as paramount virtue” (*Ibid.*, 47), and imposing, in a way that resounds with the Marxist dictatorship of the proletariat, the will of one part of the population upon the other.

Malm’s position seems to be poles apart from other degrowth authors’ invocation of the deepening of democracy as part and parcel of the degrowth transformation, or visions of a bottom-up constitution of local communities or *demos* federated at different levels (Demaria *et al.* 2013; Asara *et al.* 2013; Deriu 2012; Chertkovskaya forthcoming). While it is uncertain whether Malm can be depicted as a degrowth supporter himself (i.e., in his publications he does not use the term), bringing Leninism and in general communism together with degrowth has not been solely Malm’s pursuit. A mailing list and forum for discussion called “degrowth communism” was born in recent years, aiming to bring together and establish a dialogue between communism and the tradition of historical materialism, on one hand, and degrowth, on the other, as “traditions of thinking and practising the social-ecological transformation and the system change needed to achieve an environmentally safe and socially just life for all” (Beuret *et al.* 2020). This led to the setting up of a workshop session at the *Degrowth Vienna 2020 Conference* (*Ibid.*). Malm’s book has stimulated some vibrant discussions within the degrowth communism mailing list, with diverse positions, from critical to sympathetic¹⁰, and some

10 I thank Emanuele Leonardi for this insight.

of these reflections have reached an external public. Bue Rübner Hansen (2021), for example, interestingly notes that Malm's framing of the key choice to be made "in terms of the old debate between anarchism and a politics aimed at seizing state power" introduces a "strategic blindspot": while there is "plenty of Leninist will" (take state power), there is "little to say about the processes of class composition which allowed Lenin's rise", thus relying on a "popular power it cannot bring into being, and that it does not respect, even as it mythologises it".

These discussions reveal how nuanced the ideological landscape is, yet ideological divergences are not the only forms of differences. In terms of members' background, while there is a heterogeneity of profiles from practitioners to artists, and researchers – and while activists have played an important role in the genealogy of degrowth (Muraca 2013; Parrique 2019) – academics seem to have played a leading role as "movement intellectuals" (Eyerman and Jamison 1991), crucial for the construction of the movement's collective identity, since at least 2010. As my interviewee stated: "what defines us the most is our theoretical frame, rather than a profile of action or practical activism (...) and those who define our identity are mainly academics." Not only have international conferences, partly due to their very format, seen academics as protagonists of most sessions and plenaries, researchers have also played a prominent role in collectives that act as central nodes for the movement, such as Research & Degrowth in Barcelona, Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie in Germany, Associazione per la Decrescita in Italy, or the Institute of Political Ecology in Croatia. Indeed, around 65% of all degrowth groups are involved in research, as identified by an online survey and mapping exercise organised by degrowth activists and advertised across degrowth mailing lists and networks. Relatedly, while another form of diversity has to do with the various foci and practices of degrowth activism (see Chapter 6), probably the most important repertoire of action of the degrowth movement area so far has been the gathering of researchers, activists, practitioners, and artists

around international and regional degrowth conferences that take place (almost) annually (see Chapter 5).

There is also not much diversity in activists' class and ethnic background, as supporters seem to mainly come from the ranks of the white and academically-educated middle class and students (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018), a point also discussed extensively during the 2020 degrowth conference in Vienna. While degrowth conferences have fostered a dialogue and built alliances with alternatives and movements from the Global South, increasingly foregrounding the need for a decolonial and pluriversal approach, degrowth has so far been mostly a debate and movement developed in the Global North, as visible in the "degrowth map" (Karte von morgen n.d.) which found 372 groups/collectives across the world that define themselves as part of the degrowth movement, based however mostly in the Global North, and, most of all, in Europe.

Having ascertained that the degree of diversity is substantial in some respects (ideologies and strategic logics) but more limited in others, the question is whether this degree of diversity is unique or exceptional in social movements, and how such diversity can be integrated into a common narrative.

It is important to point out that plurality has been a key feature of movements that can be considered as "sister" and even "mother" movements of degrowth. The valorisation of difference has been at the heart of the global justice movement, not by chance referred to as the "movement of movements". The World Social Forum has been a prominent space for encountering and cross-pollinating differences. However, the movement was not simply a collection of heterogenous groups, rather, its collective identity was characterised by "a common construction" of an "alter-global subjectivity" (Toscano 2012, 79), displaying an ideological coherency around "justice globalism" (Steger and Wilson 2012). Similarly, environmental movements at both the international scale and in diverse countries such as the United Kingdom and Italy have been referred to as a "very broad church" (Beryn and Rootes 2018, 947), an "archipelago" (Diani 1988), or a "phenomenon

that is highly diverse in its forms of organisation and action (Doherty 2002). The family of environmental justice movements is particularly diverse, including, more prominently, the poor and marginalised – also due to their embeddedness in other social movements, from Indigenous movements and those for racial equality to movements for occupational health (Asara 2022; Sicotte and Brulle 2017).

Such entanglements have been found to have the potential of reaching a more heterogeneous constituency (Heaney and Rojas 2014) and of increasing a movement's transformative potential thanks to the intersectionality of struggles that allows to integrate social justice and ecological concerns (see Asara 2020b; Gottlieb 2005). What plays a fundamental role are movements' efforts to integrate the different dimensions of their collective identity (Melucci 1989; Toscano 2012; Asara 2016), i.e., the sense of a “we” negotiated through evolving tensions within movements, developed interactively through connections within a group at three interwoven levels: a cognitive and moral framework, relational, and emotional investments (Calhoun 1993; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

In the degrowth movement, despite its internal diversity, empirical research has found that two main cognitive pillars of collective identity involve the insistence on the destructiveness of economic growth. This entails the need for a reduction of material throughput and consumption in the Global North and a vision of a transformation that is pro-feminist, peaceful, democratic, bottom-up, and critical of capitalism (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018). However, the capitalist and industrial growth imperative would also need to be overcome in the Global South (see Chapter 1).

In the next and final section, I will turn to the issue of strategy, trying to grapple with the following question: how can or should such a heterogeneous and multiple transnational movement try to set up and enact a “common strategy” (Barca *et al.* 2019, 7)? This requires first defining what we mean by strategy in social movements.

Movement strategies and structure: the degrowth movement at a critical juncture

Social movement scholars define strategy as:

“A plan of collective action intended to accomplish goals within a particular context. Social movement strategy is located at the intersection between structure and agency, and it entails defining, interpreting, communicating, and implementing a plan of collective action that is believed to be a promising way to achieve a desired alternative future in light of circumstances.”
(Maney *et al.* 2012, xviii).

Strategy is a multi-level process, as plans of action, contexts and goals can be distinguished based on the level of social aggregation (micro, e.g., individual level; meso, e.g., groups or organisational level; or macro, e.g., movement or coalition level), type of institution, geographic scope, duration (short term or long term), cultural and structural characteristics, and multiple strategies can be in place in the same movement (Maney *et al.* 2012).

This clarifies that there is not a single, common strategy that should be devised by the degrowth movement, but manifold, overlapping, and embedded types of strategic decisions, depending for instance on the scale of consideration (transnational movement or local), on the temporal timeframe, or arena of action. This is especially the case for degrowth activism which is, similarly to other environmental movements, diffuse and wide-ranging and involves a complex web of actors and a range of spaces and scales (North 2011; Porta and Rucht 2002).

Moreover, following Meyer and Staggenborg (2012) we can identify (at least) three major elements of strategic decision-making: the goals and demands made by a social movement; the tactics or forms of collective action (that is, the specific means of implementing strategy, such as demonstrations, lawsuits, direct action tactics and institutionalised tactics such as lobbying etc.); and arenas (i.e., venues in which to press movement claims, e.g.,

legislatures, courts, the public, mass media, electoral politics). However, it is noteworthy that while for Meyer and Staggenborg a movement's internal organisation only counts as an influence for strategies, according to a prefigurative understanding of social movements, a movement's internal organisation counts as one main dimension of a movement strategy, because means and ends should not be overly detached and a movement's internal practices and organisations are themselves strategic (Maeckelbergh 2011). Indeed, internal strategy (movement building) and external strategy (projected outward towards achieving goals beyond the movement) are intimately linked, not only because the latter depends on the way the movement (and social movement organisations within it) is organised, but also because the former is also subject to strategic decision-making. Organisational variation includes various issues such as the extent and type of formalisation or bureaucratisation, professionalisation, grassroots participation, centralisation and hierarchy in decision-making structures, links among various levels such as national, local and, international levels, and forums available for decision-making and deliberation (Meyer and Staggenborg 2012).

How has the degrowth movement fared against such a backdrop, and evolved over time? One of the outcomes of the first two international conferences in Paris (2008) and Barcelona (2010) was the creation of the association Research & Degrowth in France and then in Spain. The latter, with its Barcelona group of ICTA (Institute of Environmental Science and Technology) researchers, acted as a supervising actor for the organisation of the following conferences, starting with the 2012 Venice and Montreal conferences. Following some accusations of over-directing the conference organisation process, the Support Group – composed of delegates of organisational groups of previous conferences – was created after the 3rd *International Degrowth Conference in Venice* (2012) to facilitate the organisation of each conference in a more collegial way. At the 5th *International Degrowth Conference in Leipzig* (2014), a Group Assembly Process called “Building Collective Actions” was

set up to “understand who we are, what we do, whom we want to collaborate with” (interview). As mentioned by the interviewee, from the Leipzig Group Assembly Process “emerges the need to structure ourselves a bit better, also in order to provide people with the possibility to participate in this international network”. This led to the first mapping exercise, and to the first assembly of the international degrowth movement, which took place in Christiania just before the 6th *International Degrowth Conference in Malmö* (2018), as a pre-conference. This first assembly was facilitated by an informal ad-hoc Network Coordination Group that sprouted from the Support Group. The assembly included around 70 people as part of 40 collectives, and “took a very basic decision, that is to create a loose network and stay in contact through a movement’s mailing list” (interview). Moreover, in the Christiania assembly, several working groups were created, such as the Activists and Practitioners group – which among other things has been organising the Global Degrowth Day since 2019 – and the *degrowth.info* editorial team was formalised (see Chapter 5), becoming the media arm of the degrowth movement (Degrowth.info n.d.).

During this period the need emerged to “give us a more representative bottom-up structure than the SG” (interview). Indeed, while the SG is perceived as a horizontal structure, it is not an open body representative of the movement (as mentioned above, it is constituted of organisers of previous conferences) or a body endowed with the task of coordinating or catalysing specific initiatives outside of the conference realm. Due to the lack of other representative bodies, the Support Group has however increasingly assumed several tasks beyond conference organisation such as managing funds from foundations. This happened after the granting of the first substantial funding in 2018 from the *Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le Progrès de l’Homme*, and a Support Group meeting in Paris. Here “there has been a debate: ‘do we want to take responsibility only for the conferences or for the movement?’ – ‘But we don’t have the mandate to take care of the movement.’ – ‘But no one does it...’”

(interview). Ultimately, it was decided that in a 2-year-transition period the Support Group would try to bring about a structuring of the network, and a network coordination group was formally established to organise and facilitate the assemblies. The funding fed into conference expenses, the *degrowth.info* media platform, summer schools, a scholarship for the ICTA Master programme on degrowth, IT support, expenses for the Support Group and the Activist Group meetings, and so on. As expectable, decisions over funding allocation, however, generated some tensions in the Support Group. In addition, insufficient coordination between the autonomous groups resulted in some “misunderstandings” or “tensions” between them. This has somewhat improved in the last year with the constitution of the “Coordination of the nodes of degrowth”, a (virtual) space of encounter and information exchange between the diverse groups that compose its network.

The second assembly took place right before the 8th *International Degrowth Conference in The Hague* (2021), where a potential two-level structure was discussed: the assembly, and a group that will represent it and constitute the “political steering” of the international degrowth movement – potentially endowed with the tasks of organising international initiatives, managing the funds, and coordinating the various autonomous groups. However, a decision on this issue was postponed to a later meeting to take place in Spring 2022.

As this short historical excursus demonstrates, the degrowth movement has mostly had a very loose organisational structure (also referred to as “an unstructured (...) way of organising” in Chapter 5) but steps are slowly being taken, in dribs and drabs, to endow it with more structure and coordination following increasing recognition that this structurelessness is greatly limiting the movement’s potential.

In the 1970s, Jo Freeman (1972) referring to the women’s liberation movement, famously argued that structurelessness led to the production of elites not accountable to the rest of the movement

and to a weakened capability to control the directions in which it develops and the political actions in which it engages. I believe that this loose organisation may have indeed hampered the political actions and efficacy of the movement as well as kept it in a sort of limbo, for instance with respect to the role of the Support Group, or the capability of making political declarations about degrowth (accomplished only at the first two conferences). Furthermore, it seems to have created “some underlying tensions between the different groups – which however have never been revealed in a clear-cut manner – which have to do with *legitimacy* and with *what degrowth is*” (interview). Finally, this structurelessness has probably also contributed to the heightened visibility of academics’ contribution to the movement’s collective identity. However, according to my interviewee, there are some countervailing fears linked with advancing towards structuring, because “structures” are paradoxically associated with “granting power” (interview).

The two-level structure discussed at the pre-conference in The Hague could be a nice starting point. Following Freeman (1972), its institution would need to take into consideration the following basic issues (the same goes with the *Degrowth International*, see Chapter 5): procedures for the selection of delegates and their rotation, accountability mechanisms, allocation of tasks/distribution of labour and type of relationships among the nodes of the network, distribution of authority and of resources, and diffusion of information to everyone. Whether the opportunity will be seized or whether the state of limbo will be protracted due to some underlying fears or failure to reach a consensus cannot be anticipated now. What is certain is that time has come for the degrowth movement to evolve into a space where not only political debates are made in academic journals, in the media or at conferences – thus spreading its ideas – but wherein strategic decisions are made to reach specific goals.

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