# URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE DEGROWTH TRANSITION:

## TOWARDS A GRASSROOTS THEORY OF CHANGE

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Since the 1970s, the 'limits to growth' position has received a great deal of attention, mostly from economic and ecological perspectives (Meadows *et al.* 1972; Bardi 2011; Turner 2014). In more recent years, the degrowth movement has been contributing an important range of new political and sociological analyses – offering deeper insight into post-growth narratives of progress and evaluating alternative policies and structures. In addition, it has continued to update and refine the ecological critique of growth economics in response to those who continue to fetishise growth (see, D'Alisa *et al.* 2015; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017; Kallis 2017; Kallis *et al.* 2018). A key position within the degrowth movement is that technological advance and efficiency gains in production will be unable to resolve ecological transgressions if such innovations are applied within a growth paradigm of economy (Hickel and Kallis 2019; Ward *et al.* 2016).

This article seeks to extend and deepen the understanding of degrowth by examining the concept and movement from a perspective that has received little attention – namely, theories of transition. Much has been written on the 'why' of degrowth; it is time to focus more on the strategic question of 'how'. Our specific interest lies in understanding which levers of power in society (*e.g.* the state, technology, capital and social movements) may be needed or available to drive a democratic degrowth transition. How might those levers reshape society, and in what ways, to initiate a degrowth process of planned economic contraction?

While addressing questions of transition and transformation, our additional point of departure is to look at degrowth through the lens of

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urban studies – and conversely, to look at urbanity through the lens of degrowth (Alexander and Gleeson 2019). Harvey Molotch (1976) long ago described the city as a 'growth machine'. How to mobilise socially and politically to transform that machine on democratic terms is clearly a pressing issue of our time. Can the emerging degrowth literature shed light on this urban challenge? Can urban studies offer insights for the degrowth movement? Literature at the nexus of these issues is scarce (Lietaert 2010; Xue 2015; March 2016; Lehtinen 2018) and the question of an urban degrowth transition is sorely neglected. But one thing is clear: it will be in cities where most of humanity experiences, and responds to, the deepening crises of the global neoliberal order (Wright *et al.* 2018).

Below, we explore the role urban social movements might need to play as the principal democratic organising forces of a degrowth transition in cities. As elaborated further in later sections, these movements are 'urban-orientated mobilisations that influence structural social change' (Castells 1983: 305). The premise is that through 'self-organisation of independent actors', they raise 'radical possibilities for living different urban lives in reconfigured urban economies' (Bulkeley 2013: 11). Exploring this mode of societal transformation is especially important for those who hold little faith that governments, especially in capitalist societies, would initiate a 'top-down' degrowth process . It was that pessimism that led us to develop, in the context of degrowth, a grassroots theory of change 'from below'.

The article begins by outlining the various 'growth imperatives' that shape capitalist economies, in order to justify our pessimism with respect to leadership on degrowth coming from governments.[1] On these foundations, a theory of change is presented that we maintain is the most coherent framework for creating, by design rather than disaster, a post-growth (and thus post-capitalist) urbanity. The degrowth literature is utilised to frame our analysis and argue that, given the various growth imperatives constraining government action under globalised and increasingly urbanised capitalism today, the emergence of a degrowth society will need to be driven into existence from the grassroots up, rather than from the top-down. Put otherwise, in a neoliberal order where so-called 'representative governments' are deeply compromised by unsustainable growth

1 While some of the growth imperatives we discuss apply equally to notionally socialist or communist economies (e.g. China), the transitional challenge raised by 'beyond growth' presents different questions. Accordingly, our focus herein is on capitalist societies that have a grounding in democracy.

imperatives, any degrowth transition will require engaged citizenries employing radical and participatory democratic practices to induce this paradigmatic shift in political economy. The long historical conspiracy of liberal democracy and consumptive capitalism suggests that the ballot box is a political tool that will not foster the transition to a post-growth dispensation.

After sketching this theory of change, the analysis concludes by outlining how early signs are emerging of what, tentatively, could be considered the birth of a 'degrowth urbanity'. This review includes post-consumerist movements that are prefiguring degrowth cultures of consumption by embracing material sufficiency as a path to freedom, meaning and reduced ecological burdens; community-led urban resistance and renewal movements; transgressive and creative forms of the sharing economy as a means of thriving even in a contracting biophysical economy; as well as other social movements and strategies that are seeking to develop new (or renewed) informal urban economies 'beyond the market'.

Highlighting the importance of urban social movements does not negate the need for structural change via state action. Human behaviour inevitably takes place within structures of constraint that often 'lock' people in to high-impact living (Sanne 2002), while locking many more out of economic security. This is a systemic problem that will ultimately require a systemic response. Nevertheless, our core thesis is that a post-growth or degrowth state will most likely be the outcome, not the driving force, of a just and sustainable post-capitalist society. In turn, significant structural change will only occur *after* grassroots movements initiate new post-capitalist economies and cultures within the shell of capitalist economies. As David Harvey (2013: xvi) contends, reclaiming the democratic city 'cannot occur without the creation of a vigorous anti-capitalist movement that focuses on the transformation of daily urban life as its goal.' Building on that insight, we will argue that there will never be a transformative politics or economics beyond growth until there is a broad culture of sufficiency, solidarity and participatory democracy that demands it.

## The growth imperatives of capitalism

To lay the foundations for our theory of change, it is necessary to outline why the political economy of growth has acquired its hegemony (Purdey 2010), and why hopes of an enlightened government or state leading a

degrowth transition from the top-down seem slim-to-non-existent (Alexander 2013). These foundational inquiries are important because understanding the extent of capitalism's 'growth imperative' has implications for political, economic and, more specifically, business strategies for change. If it is accepted that capitalism requires growth for stability and that ongoing growth is unsustainable, then it follows that capitalism has an ecological time limit.

Our starting premise, then, is that a 'degrowth capitalism' (to be distinguished from capitalism in recession) is a contradiction-in-terms (Foster 2011; Trainer 2012). The logic of this observation is outlined below by highlighting the various growth imperatives of capitalism. Note that several of these imperatives blur into each other, even as they represent distinct issues. Even one of these structural issues would suffice to establish that capitalism is growth-dependent – together, they demonstrate the structural logic of this growth imperative.

## Microeconomic and macroeconomic growth imperatives

Within capitalist economies, corporate firms must seek to maximise profits and productivity, or risk being destroyed by more ambitious and ruthless market competitors (Gordon and Rosenthal 2003; Binswanger 2009; Harvey 2008). While human greed plays a role in the pursuit of profit-maximisation, this first point is more fundamental: the nature and systemic logic of capitalist economies require profit-maximisation at the microeconomic level, which functions to give the capitalist macroeconomy a built-in structural tendency toward growth (Smith 2010; Blauwhof 2012). From a systems perspective, this growth imperative is an emergent property of the interactions of microeconomic agents. Thus, the macroeconomic structure of capitalism is organised such that individual firms must accord with its golden rule: expand capital (Harvey 2011).

## Debt as a growth imperative

Similarly, there is a related growth imperative created by debt-based monetary systems – especially, but not exclusively, under capitalism. Currently, most money is loaned into existence by private banks as interest-bearing debt. In order to pay back the debt plus the interest, this implies an expansion of the monetary supply (Trainer 2011). Banks will

generally prefer to lend to people, organisations or institutions most able to pay back the debts incurred, and those most likely to make the most profit get given credit first. This lending system inherently accords capitalism a pro-growth structure since money – and the power it brings – is more readily available to firms likely to make the most profit. Again at the macroeconomic level, the same golden rule of capitalism applies: grow the economy or enter crisis.

### Power as a growth imperative

Furthermore, the largest corporations and governments that are doing financially well within the capitalist system would not tolerate a deliberate transition to a post-growth or degrowth economy. At least since Marx, there has been a line of critical theory that conceptualises the state as merely a tool for securing and advancing the interests of the richest agents or institutions in society (Marx and Engels 1848). In a market society, money is power; the powerful want to remain powerful; thus, the powerful want more money to secure and advance their interests. The logic is simple but compelling: '[a] government is thus to some extent forced to please the economic elite in order to stay in power' (Boillat *et al.* 2012: 601). Governments also seek a growing economy, because that implies a larger tax base on which to draw when implementing policy. There is an important geopolitical factor here: governments need growth to maintain or advance their balance of power in a military sense.

### Globalisation as a growth imperative

Indeed, even if a government *wanted* to pursue a degrowth agenda, there are global and national economic forces at play which would obstruct such an agenda being rolled out. This may be termed the problem of 'Empire', a concept developed by post-Marxist theorists, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000). Not only are nation-states today constrained by numerous international trade agreements and powerful global institutions, but the free flow of capital around the globe has given new power to an imperium of transnational corporations that can now move their financial resources from country-to-country with unprecedented ease. If governments were to create unattractive financial conditions (*e.g.* by raising corporate taxes or minimum wages), corporations could threaten 'capital flight'. Simply

being aware of the possibility of capital flight can insidiously constrain government action through fear, even in the absence of an explicit threat. The globalisation of capital, therefore, creates another structural growth imperative.

In summary, the possibility of a state-led degrowth transition seems impossibly constrained by the structural imperatives of capitalism. The growth-dependent, heavily indebted market economies we know today would be unable to adjust to the types and speed of the foundational changes required to avert ecological and financial crisis. This inevitably has an urban dimension too, with the city itself being described as a 'growth machine' by Harvey Molotch (1976), a perspective that has provoked an entire tradition of scholarship and analysis (see Cox 2017). Molotch (1976: 310) argued that 'this growth imperative is the most important constraint upon available options for local initiative in social and economic reform.' In an age when capitalism has attained near-complete hegemony, growth-orientated societies do not know how to deliberately create a macroeconomy or urban form that produces and consumes *less*. Yet, as the limits to growth (Bardi 2011) and degrowth literatures maintain (Kallis *et al.* 2018; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017), that is precisely what seems to be necessary for ecological viability.

## Degrowth from below: Towards a grassroots theory of change

If the global economy is to operate within the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet, this requires (among other things) the richest nations to initiate a degrowth process of planned economic contraction, on the path to a 'steady state' economy of stable biophysical throughput (Hickel and Kallis 2019). Obviously, the poorest nations would also need to achieve some 'steady state' in time, but their economic capacities must first be developed in some form to ensure basic needs for all are met (Escobar 2015; O'Neill *et al.* 2018). We do not argue that a voluntary transformation of overgrown economies is likely, only that, by force of reason and evidence, some such transition will be necessary if there is to be any human reconciliation with nature.

There is much governments could be doing to help produce more just and sustainable societies – and there is no shortage of literature providing stimulating advice. However, the central point from the analysis above is

that governments, especially under capitalism, have various growth imperatives built-in to their structures. It follows that attempting to take control of the state may not necessarily be the best way to initiate the transition to a just and sustainable degrowth economy, for even a socialist state may find itself locked into unsustainable growth (Sarkar 1999). Therefore, a post-growth state may only ever be the outcome, not the driving force, of a movement for degrowth (Alexander and Gleeson 2019).

This raises the key question of what social, political and economic forces or mechanisms might drive such a transition beyond growth (Demaria *et al.* 2013). If conventional representative democracy is unable to accommodate the degrowth imperative by virtue of politicians and dominant institutions being locked into the growth paradigm, then it follows that the emergence of degrowth will have to depend on a post-capitalist politics of participatory democracy and grassroots activism (Gibson-Graham 2006). This means relocalising political power through participatory and collective action, rather than waiting for governments or corporations to solve problems that they are either unable or unwilling to solve. In an urban age, this may well depend on urban social movements creating, within the city boundaries, post-capitalist degrowth economies and cultures from the grassroots up. The remainder of this article outlines and explains this theory of change.

## Transforming the city without (at first) taking power

In pro-growth political contexts – particularly contemporary cities in the most affluent regions of the world (Molotch 1976) – it is at the household- and community-levels where people arguably have most freedom to influence their urban existence in a post-growth direction (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013). Thus, it is at this grassroots-level where we invest hope for change; where the sparks of transformation are going to have to ignite if a degrowth society is to emerge. Individuals may not feel like they have much influence over the decisions of their members of parliament, or the decisions of big business or other global institutions, all of which are manifestly entrenched within the growth paradigm.

This is especially so in the neoliberal age, in which the dominant task of urban governance, according to Harvey (1989: 11), is 'to lure highly mobile and flexible production, financial, and consumption flows into its space.' Furthermore, the distributive implications, as Hugh Stretton (1970:

310) noted long ago, are that cities become devices for 'shifting resources from poorer to richer'. But within the structural constraints of any society or city, there nevertheless resides a realm of freedom through which individuals and communities – insofar as they have escaped or resisted the neoliberal worldview – can resist and oppose the existing order and make their influence felt (Holloway 2002; Trainer 2010; Holmgren 2018). Indeed, urban social movements have often arisen in reaction to neoliberal urbanism (Mayer 2006), and this conflict may be set to deepen.

It is in those cracks which permit a degree of urban autonomy and self-governance where participants in a degrowth movement need to thrust the crowbar of oppositional activity to leverage their influence. Through a process of participatory democracy and grassroots action, there might be a chance to 'crack capitalism', as John Holloway (2010) puts it. We say that there might just be a chance in the sense that it is the best, perhaps only hope. This is not to say that the household or community levels are necessarily the ideal spheres of urban transformation (a question we leave open). Rather, it is to acknowledge that if governments will not embrace degrowth, and businesses must grow for viability, then the household and community levels – acting and organising locally (though still with an eye on the 'big picture') – are the most promising spheres of transformative potential.[2] There is deep historical wisdom to draw on here. For Aristotle, 'economy,' meant the good management of the household, and for him the household was the foundation of the *polis*. In our age of apparent governmental paralysis and growth fetishism, this Aristotelian perspective might again highlight the necessity of a political strategy that begins with the intentional transformation of urban daily life (as explored further in the next section).

This perspective could be easily misunderstood, so a word of clarification is in-order. Strong top-down governance of (urban) economies would, in many ways, be desirable. Governments, local and national, could do many things to advance the causes of justice and sustainability, and elsewhere we have shared our thoughts on policies for a post-growth economy

2 Social enterprises, non-profit businesses, or the 'B corporation' movement might also hold some potential for post-capitalist economics (Khmara and Kronenberg 2018). Yet, these alternative practices and institutions inevitably operate within a growth-orientated system and compete with (and tend to be outcompeted by) conventional capitalist firms that are significantly advantaged in the market by externalising environmental and social costs. Thus, in our view, alternative corporate forms are likely to remain marginal and easily accommodated by the existing system.

(Alexander 2016; Alexander and Gleeson 2019). We acknowledge, furthermore, that mobilising for degrowth only at the grassroots (or micro-economic) level is problematic, since voluntarily reducing energy and resource consumption in a market society can function to reduce pressure on markets and, hence, induce price reductions. Those pricing dynamics can then lead to *increased* consumption by actors not attempting to create a degrowth society and who happily exploit access to cheaper commodities. This 'wicked problem' has led Blake Alcott (2008) to highlight the legitimate concern that frugality in some sectors of society might engender a consumption 'rebound effect' elsewhere. Accordingly, in order to affect structural reductions in energy and resource use, there ultimately needs to be some mechanisms to limit aggregate use – and this requires cooperation by formal political and economic institutions.

Nevertheless, our position is that growth fetishism has such a strong hold on the branches of government that efforts directed toward producing strong top-down policy for a degrowth economy will essentially be ignored by policy-makers – unable to make it through the filter of capitalist structures and ideology. Thus, those efforts for progressive top-down change may be wasted. Marginal anti-capitalist movements like degrowth do not, of course, have a surplus of energy or resources to waste or misdirect. If the zebra of growth capitalism will not change its stripes, it thereby follows that people should not dedicate their efforts toward convincing it to do so. Rather, people should dedicate their efforts toward areas with the greatest leverage – with the greatest potential to effect positive change. With respect to degrowth, the areas that have the greatest leverage lie amongst the grassroots of social movements and culture, not parliament or the courts – at least at this early stage in the transformation (Alexander 2013; Demaria *et al.* 2013).

The socio-cultural domain may have special disruptive potential due to the fact that other spheres of transformation can be understood as tools or means, whereas the socio-cultural sphere can be understood as the source of goals or ends. In much the same way as the tool of 'fire' can have a positive or negative impact on our lives, depending on how it is used and how much of it there is, the tools of technology, business, and politics can advance or inhibit the transition to a degrowth society, depending on the social values and desires that shape their implementation and development. For these reasons, the socio-cultural sphere can be considered fundamental, in the sense that it provides the ends towards

which available means are directed. Put otherwise, a revolutionary consciousness (or new 'social imaginary') must precede the revolution.

This is not meant to downplay the undeniable importance of technological, economic and political innovations on the path to a new, ecologically viable and socially just way of life. A coordinated, multi-faceted and multiscalar approach is both necessary and desirable (Mayer 2013). But insofar as technology, business and politics reflect the culture in which they are situated, it would seem that disruptive innovation in the socio-cultural sphere may need to be the prime mover, so to speak, which would then enable or ignite further disruptive innovations in other spheres of life.

This suggests that we must carefully consider not only what societal conditions would best facilitate the urban realisation of a degrowth economy, but also what role social or cultural movements might have to play in producing those conditions. For even if notions of degrowth were to gain widespread acceptance, it seems highly unlikely that a degrowth economy would emerge unless people had some idea of what needed to be done at the household and community levels to bring about such an economy. In other words, it is not enough merely to offer a critique of existing *structures* of growth capitalism; it is equally important to explore the question of *how one ought to live* in opposition to those structures. If governments will not lead this process, social movements might have to change the world without (at first) taking state power (Holloway 2010; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013).

## The practice of post-capitalist politics and economics

> [W]ithout social movements, no challenge will emerge from civil society able to shake the institutions of the state through which norms are enforced, values preached, and property preserved' (Castells 1983).

In the introduction, we noted David Harvey's comment that reclaiming the city 'cannot occur without the creation of a vigorous anti-capitalist movement that focuses on the transformation of daily urban life as its goal' (Harvey 2013: xvi). While a singular or homogenous anti-capitalist movement does not exist, the following brief review indicates that a heterogeneous body of loosely connected urban social movements is emerging that seems to be prefiguring aspects of a degrowth society. The vocabulary of 'degrowth' does not need to be used for a movement to contribute to the emergence of degrowth.

## The Voluntary Simplicity Movement

The lived experience of degrowth necessarily implies a deep re-evaluation of consumer affluence and embrace of lifestyles of radical material sufficiency. This exploration of post-consumerist ways of living is currently being undertaken within the Voluntary Simplicity Movement (Alexander 2009), with participants seeking to live more on less (Kasser 2017). This is an example of a social movement resisting capitalist cultures of hyper-consumption and beginning to establish the counter-cultural conditions needed for a degrowth economy to emerge structurally. Some hard-nosed political economists might be inclined to dismiss this as a naive 'lifestyle movement' of little consequence. However, that critique masks its own naivety, since the macroeconomic or structural changes required for degrowth will not arrive without a material culture of sufficiency that demands them. As Taylor *et al*. (2017: 796) argue: 'modern mass consumption developed in nineteenth century cities as a bottom-up process of acquisitive behavior [and …] to reverse the now uber-acquisitiveness will also be a bottom-up process.'

Based on the largest empirical examination of this movement, it has been estimated that as many as 200 million people are exploring 'simpler ways' of living in the West (Alexander and Ussher 2012) – even if it must be acknowledged that this involves a wide spectrum of practices, from modest attempts to reduce consumption to more radical expressions of downshifting. Challenging the popular conception of 'simple living' as being a rural lifestyle, the same study suggested that approximately 80 percent of voluntary simplifiers are actually based in urban centres. Furthermore, the results showed that 68 percent of voluntary simplifiers have come to conceive of themselves as being part of a simple living movement. This is a significant finding, given that the Voluntary Simplicity Movement has historically tended to be apolitical or escapist (Grigsby 2004). Much social movement theory suggests that the emergence of group consciousness (or a shared 'social imaginary') is an important and necessary phase in the maturation of a social movement into a more potent political force (see McCann 2006; Taylor 2004).

The political and economic significance of the Voluntary Simplicity Movement is most apparent in how it can carve out *more time for people to create the new economy*. Building a new economy from the grassroots-up will take time, and currently most households are 'time poor', locked into the work-and-spend cycle (Coote and Franklin 2013). By rethinking

consumption levels, embracing frugality and exchanging superfluous stuff for more free time, voluntary simplicity provides a pathway that can enable participation in, and organisation of, grassroots activism, while also being directly in-line with sufficiency-oriented values of degrowth.

As well as facilitating and enabling urban activism, a broader uptake of voluntary simplicity could also impact the organisation of the economy more broadly. By carving-out more time beyond the formal economy, new forms of community engagement and self-provision could arise (see next section) as well as increased 'home-based production' (see below) – all of which could begin to transform the economic landscape 'from below' by creating new economic agents and entities. Furthermore, existing modes of economic organisation and production may wither away as demand for certain high-impact products and lifestyles lose their cultural appeal (*e.g.* SUVs, 'fast fashion' and fossil fuels), including a shift in workplace culture and organisation as more people choose time over money, reducing working hours in a contracting formal economy. Indeed, degrowth could be defined as the politics (and macroeconomics) of voluntary simplicity.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Voluntary Simplicity Movement must expand, radicalise and organise if it is ever to become a transformative political and economic force (Trainer 2010). This implies 'a shift to change the everyday behaviours of billions of people, and, just as important, to change the "development" aspirations of other billions of people to realise such behaviour' (Taylor *et al.* 2017: 796). Like all the examples discussed below, it is likely that online networking will need to play a key role in mobilising urban social movements in the 21st century (see Bennett and Segerberg 2012), primarily by reducing the transaction costs of organisation, networking and information sharing.

### Transition initiatives, permaculture, and localisation movements

The 'Transition Towns' Movement (now generally referred to as 'Transition Initiatives') is a recent social experiment that emerged just over a decade ago – first in the UK and then expanded to more than forty countries around the world. It remains bubbling under the surface in many towns and cities (Hopkins 2008; Hopkins 2011). Whereas the more-established Ecovillage Movement has generally sought (or been required) to escape the urban context to establish experiments in alternative living, the Transition Movement, motivated by similar concerns, tends to accept

the challenge of transforming city life from *within* the urban boundary. A 600-page practical urban manual has just been published by co-originator of the permaculture concept, David Holmgren (2018), who calls on people to 'retrofit the suburbs for the energy descent future.'

The fundamental aims of Transition Initiatives are to respond to the overlapping challenges of climate change, peak oil, social isolation and economic instability by decarbonising and relocalising the economy through a community-led model of change based on permaculture design principles. This urban movement has much overlap with the grassroots politics of degrowth outlined above, as well as broader localisation (de Young and Princen 2012) and permaculture movements (Holmgren 2002). Holmgren has even applied permaculture to organisational practices, arguing that they apply equally well to business. Here, two broad notions of 'business' can be distinguished. There is the conventional sense, defined by self-interested accumulation and all that this implies as a framing for capitalism. Of course, there would still need to be businesses in a degrowth economy, albeit alternative forms, through which production, circulation and consumption would be organised. This is not the place to develop a detailed institutional framework for an alternative economy, but the 'participatory economics' of Michael Albert (2004) or 'community economies' of J.K Gibson-Graham *et al.* (2013) are paving the way.

Rather than waiting for governments to lead, urban communities in the Transition Movement are embracing the 'power of just doing stuff', as expressed by the movement's most prominent spokesperson, Rob Hopkins (2013). In doing so, the movement runs counter to the dominant narrative of globalisation, representative democracy and economic growth. Instead, it offers a positive, participatory, highly localised but more humble vision of a post-carbon and post-growth future, as well as an evolving roadmap for getting there through grassroots activism. In the words of post-growth economist, Tim Jackson, this international grassroots movement is 'the most vital social experiment of our time' (quoted in Hopkins 2011).

Although still small and easily accommodated by capitalism at its current scale, something resembling an upscaled and radicalised Transition Movement may be necessary to the emergence of an urban degrowth economy from below. Again, without attempting a detailed sketch of the new economy, an upscaled and diversified Transition Movement would impact on economic practices and organisation through increased localisation of production, with focus placed on collective sufficiency over

limitless economic expansion. Simultaneosuly, any degrowth economy will need to 'develop' certain elements of the economy (*e.g.* renewable energy, public transport and organic food) – all of which is indicative of new organisational forms and capacities, decoupled from the logic of accumulation for its own sake.

## Reactive urban mobilisations: Localised resistance to neoliberal urbanism

While the Transition Movement is generally focussed on building the new economy, it is worth noting that there are also historical and contemporary examples of urban communities mobilising in more reactive ways to the city as 'growth machine' (Molotch 1976) – opposing neoliberal urbanism rather than building an alternative. In the Australian context, the 'Save Our Suburbs' coalition is such an example, which is focussed on resisting the destructive renewal of urban consolidation and over-development (Lewis 1999: Ch. 10). This movement seeks to mobilise communities with the aim of establishing planning and design policies that maintain or improve neighbourhood amenity; are environmentally sensitive and sustainable; and are genuinely democratic and consultative in nature. The network is often demonised by planners and progressives who advocate market-based compaction. There is also a risk that the movement reflects a class of privileged actors who, far from being motivated by hopes of contributing to the common good, merely seek to maintain the clean and spacious affluence of their own often affluent and exclusive suburban contexts.

Nevertheless, this urban social movement (and others like it) may hold the seeds of something more progressive – at least potentially. The problem with current modes of urban development – especially poorly designed in-fill apartments on suburban subdivisions prevalent in contemporary Australia – is that the outcome often inhibits or render impossible the modes of urban sufficiency implicit in the vision for degrowth. Until urban communities mobilise in the face of capital and reclaim the right to shape their own urban futures, cities are likely to continue being shaped and reshaped by developers driven by profit-maximisation (Harvey 1989; Gleeson 2014), rather than the desire to transform urban landscapes in ecologically viable and socially convivial ways.

In this context the nascent 'Extinction Rebellion' deserves note, which recently erupted in the UK and elsewhere (Read and Alexander 2020).

Based on well organised and creative strategies of non-violent civil disobedience, it is the most recent example of reactive grassroots political mobilisation manifesting in urban contexts. It thus draws inspiration from activists and social movements as diverse as Occupy, Gandhi and the Independence Movement, the suffragettes, and the Civil Rights Movement. While still too early to assess the full potential and impacts of Extinction Rebellion, it has already achieved some of its goals by bringing renewed media attention to climate change and loss of biodiversity. It has also been a contributing factor to the UK becoming the first nation in the world to declare a state of environment and climate 'emergency'. This is an apt example of how urban mobilisations can dialectically move from the streets to the governmental corridors of power: emerging in the socio-cultural sphere, but inducing – or threatening to induce – political and macroeconomic shifts in societal structures and institutions, which could then facilitate further cultural shifts.

## An economics of sharing: Access without ownership

The fast-emerging 'sharing economy' is another primarily urban phenomenon and signifies one of the theoretical buzzwords of recent years (Frenken 2017). The density of populations in urban centres, coupled with Internet access, provides fertile grounds for sharing economies to flourish, and it is heartening to see this movement expanding in cities around the world (Nelson 2018). By sharing more between households – facilitated by the Internet or traditional community engagement – less energy and resource intensive production is required to meet social needs. Even in a contracting economy (whether by design or by crisis), households can still secure access to tools and other materials, provided a culture of sharing emerges. This is the revolutionary reinterpretation of 'efficiency' implicit in the degrowth paradigm: produce less, share more. Beyond goods and services, theorists are beginning to explore the potential of sharing land and housing as a promising means of overcoming some of the access barriers to this fundamental need (Nelson 2018). In what has become a slogan of the movement, the sharing economy is about 'access without ownership,' suggesting that a revision of property relations is underway.

As always, caution must be shown, as the sharing economy is a broad umbrella, which can include forms easily co-opted by conventional economic practices which, thereby, lose their transgressive force (Frenken

2017; McLaren and Agyeman 2017). For instance, AirBnB has few environmental credentials if it merely makes long-distance travel more affordable; while access to expensive handbags through sharing schemes is not progressive if it entrenches consumer culture. In contrast, the online organisation, 'Streetbank', is one of the most authentic expressions of sharing: people create accounts and list what they would like to borrow from and share with neighbours, without money ever changing hands.

It is clear that in a degrowth economy, non-monetary sharing of this latter kind provides a key strategy for adapting to, and even flourishing in, conditions of economic contraction. 'Wealth' is created by sharing, without needing extra (and even reducing) resource or energy intensive production. The challenge will be to ensure that the new economic organisations that emerge in the 'sharing economy' are not merely exploiting under-utilised assets for private benefit, but are structured cooperatively to permit and create broadly distributed common wealth (see Bauwens and Amos 2018). Otherwise the sharing economy will merely be a mask for the same old logic of private accumulation and have little transformative force.

**Home-based production and the informal 'gift' economy**

An urban degrowth movement might also involve turning the household (once again) into a place of production, not merely consumption. On this point, some inspiration can be found in the past. Patrick Mullins and Chris Kynaston (2000) assess what they call the 'urban peasant thesis', and their review of the evidence shows that up until the middle of the twentieth century, Australian urban households operated a highly developed subsistence-based, domestic economy. This included the production of foodstuffs in suburban backyards, but extended to the manufacture of other household goods, including clothes, furniture and even owner-built housing. Thus the dwelling and the yard were seen primarily in utilitarian, rather than aesthetic, terms. This 'urban peasantry' declined, however, in the post-War boom, as the rise of mass consumer capitalism enabled households to purchase goods previously produced within the household. Any degrowth or post-capitalist transition may well see the remergence of an 'urban peasantry' in this sense, albeit one shaped by different times and concerns. If the automation of the workforce leaves more people unemployed, it may be that people have the time (and incentives) to invest

in home-based production as a means of self-provision, thus pointing to new (or resurrected) places of work. This shift from formal economy to household economy is also another example of post-capitalist economies, insofar as goods and servies are primarily produced for use, rather than exchange (Gibson-Graham 2006; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013).

An urban degrowth economy also implies an incremental re-emergence of the gift economy – to some extent, at least (Eisenstein 2011). If material living standards are forever expected to rise, long working hours required to support that ongoing material advance will generally leave people 'time poor', making it difficult for people to gift their skills and resources in the spirit of community and neighbourly support. By consuming less and carving out more time for practices outside the formal economy, the practice of voluntary simplicity also can also enliven the informal 'gift' economy. In similar ways to sharing practices, this can ensure society's needs are met even in a contracting (formal) economy.

*The multitude of (mostly small) examples: Toward a degrowth urbanity*

We have highlighted a few key examples of what can tentatively be considered the emergence of a degrowth urbanity. Other examples deserving further attention are the rise of 'DIY' or 'fix it' repair workshops and 'bike kitchens' (Bradley 2016); the growing tide of climate activism and divestment campaigns; the exploration of local currencies and crypto-currencies; progressive unions; as well as culture jammers and oppositional artists who are exposing the violence of current institutions and telling new narratives of progress and prosperity. Although most of those subcultures and counter-practices do not use the vocabulary of 'degrowth', each of them can be seen to be working on an aspect of societal change consonant with visions of degrowth (Crossley 2003). 'Green' political parties are also playing a role, by emphasising value-orientations and policy platforms that are (or try to be) less subservient to the neoliberal rule of capital. However, due to the various growth imperatives reviewed earlier, they are finding enactment of a post-capitalist politics a thorny practical challenge. Accordingly, we agree with Taylor *et al.* (2017: 798) that 'at this juncture of capitalism, there is a need to embrace a myriad of radical groups […] rather than a monolithic single national party to provide opposition to capital.'

Nevertheless, one must not exaggerate what remains a notable, albeit marginal confluence of urban social movements for deep change. The world does not appear to be on the brink of a degrowth revolution. The

movements for change noted above could easily fail, unable to thrive in the inhospitable context of neoliberal capitalism. In our view, however, there are reasons to believe that a degrowth urbanity is emerging, even if it is very much in its infancy. The fact that the degrowth movement *must grow* to achieve its aims is an irony not lost on the authors.

The triggers which will ignite that expansion is a key question that has not been addressed in detail. Our article began with the pessimistic acknowledgement that we see little hope in governments leading the change toward degrowth. We close by pointing to a different, even deeper pessimism: any urban social movements for degrowth are unlikely to scale-up significantly until (deeper) global crises shake people awake. Crisis can be a mobilising force (Solnit 2016), and significant societal change may well require the instability that crisis creates. The urban agriculture practices that emerged in Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union (greatly reducing Cuba's oil supply) provides an example of how to turn crisis into opportunity (Friedrichs 2013; Boillat *et al.* 2013) – even as one must not to gloss over the hardship entailed by Cuba's 'special period'. There are also a range of hopeful responses to the economic crises in Greece, which offer insight into ways of dealing positively with challenging and turbulent times (see Kalogeraki 2018).

This is not to romanticise or desire crisis. When the crisis of capitalism deepens – perhaps in the form of a new financial crisis, further ecological breakdown or another global pandemic akin to COVID-19 – the task will be to ensure that such destabilised conditions are used to advance progressive humanitarian and ecological ends rather than exploited to further entrench the austerity politics of neoliberalism. Of course, the latter remains a real possibility, as the arch-capitalist Milton Friedman (2002: xiv) said:

> Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

Our vision is for a confluence of networked urban social movements to build a new degrowth economy within the shell of a decaying capitalist economy. This is not because this grassroots approach is necessarily the best way to create a degrowth economy, but because there does not seem to be any mechanism for its emergence other than social movements building it from below, especially in times of crisis. Only *after* this new

economy has significantly scaled-up will there be any prospect of a significant politicisation of degrowth from the top-down – that is, through mechanisms of government, law and regulation. In short, a politics of degrowth depends on a culture of collective sufficiency, solidarity and self-provision that prefigures a degrowth economy and, over time, demands its reflection in societal structures and institutions. To begin with a 'top-down' approach would put the cart before the horse.

## Conclusion

The theory of change sketched in this article maintains that degrowth will not be realised until there is a confluence of engaged and active urban social movements that demand degrowth (or something akin to it) and are prepared to drive new worlds into existence from below. Many cities of the Global North are in thrall to neoliberal governance regimes wedded to freewheeling growth and opposed to democratic steering of economies and resources (Harvey 2013, Swyngedouw 2009). In such settings, no single observed movement for degrowth is currently capable of inducing the revolutionary changes required for degrowth.

Nevertheless, there are a variety of existing and emerging urban social actions and coalitions that, while far from representing an organised movement for degrowth, prefigure aspects of what transition politics could look like if radicalised and organised over the long-term. In his recent book, *The Promise of the Political*, Erik Swyngedouw (2018) asserts the power of urban insurgencies – the sorts of radical uprisings seen in global cities in recent years – to reassert urban politics in the quest for sustainable futures. At a time when so-called 'representative democracies' are deeply compromised by various growth imperatives, urban social movements have a significant and necessary role to play in reasserting participatory democratic control over urban futures.

Furthermore, as the dominant growth economies continue to collide with ecological limits in coming years, the case for degrowth should become clearer to more people, which could act as a mobilising force. Given the new urban preponderance – which is likely to continue to strengthen this century – cities will be the foreground of human responses to global ecological crisis. If, as urbanists insist, they are machines for human ambition, they must clearly be rewired – literally *reorganised* – for a post-growth world.

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