

# Social-ecological planning as collective self-limitation

28 - 29 November 2024

Scuola Normale Superiore – Palazzo Strozzi, Florence

Matthias Schmelzer – University of Flensburg



# FINANCIAL TIMES

A stylized illustration of a city street scene. In the foreground, several people are walking, including a man in a blue jacket, a woman in a red hijab, and a woman in a pink jacket pushing a bicycle. The background features modern buildings, a bridge, and a plane flying in the sky. The overall color palette is dominated by warm tones like orange, yellow, and blue.

## Your goal

You need to keep global warming to 1.5C by cutting energy-related carbon dioxide emissions to net zero by 2050. In 2021, they reached a record 36bn tonnes a year. You must also deal with other greenhouse gases, and protect people and nature, for the planet to remain habitable.

This game is based on published scientific research and bespoke modelling by the International Energy Agency for the FT. You can read more about [how it was created here](#).

Good luck. The planet is counting on you.

Play

# Where are we?

JOURNAL ARTICLE

## The 2024 state of the climate report: Perilous times on planet Earth <sup>FREE</sup>

William J Ripple ✉, Christopher Wolf ✉, Jillian W Gregg, Johan Rockström, Michael E Mann, Naomi Oreskes, Timothy M Lenton, Stefan Rahmstorf, Thomas M Newsome, Chi Xu, Jens-Christian Svenning, Cássio Cardoso Pereira, Beverly E Law, Thomas W Crowther

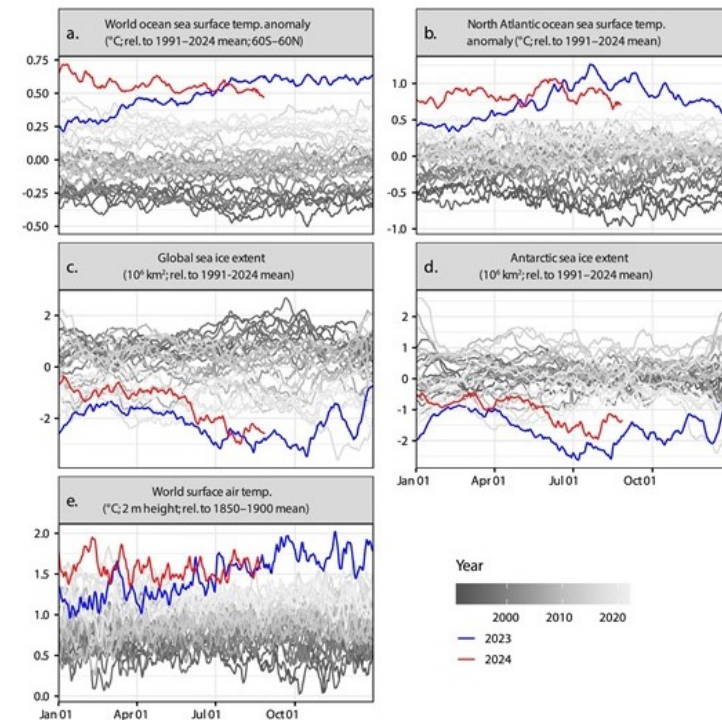
[Author Notes](#)

*BioScience*, biae087, <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biae087>

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We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster. This is a global emergency beyond any doubt. Much of the very fabric of life on Earth is imperiled. We are stepping into a critical and unpredictable new phase of the climate crisis. For many years, scientists, including a group of more than 15,000, have sounded the alarm about the impending dangers of climate change driven by increasing greenhouse gas emissions and ecosystem change (Ripple et al. 2020). For half a century, global



**Figure 1.** Unusual climate anomalies in 2023 and 2024. Ocean temperatures (a, b) are presently far outside their historical ranges. These anomalies reflect the combined effect of long-term climate change and short-term variability. Sources and additional details about each variable are provided in supplemental file S1. Each line corresponds to a different year, with darker gray representing later years. All of the variables shown are daily estimates.

# Where are we?

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### Risk of societal collapse

- „Climate change is a glaring symptom of a deeper systemic issue: **ecological overshoot**, where human consumption outpaces the Earth's ability to regenerate (Rees 2023, Ripple et al. 2024). Overshoot is an inherently unstable state that cannot persist indefinitely. As pressures increase and the risk of Earth's climate system switching to a **catastrophic state rises (Steffen et al. 2018)**, **more and more scientists have begun to research the possibility of societal collapse** (Brozović 2023). Even in the absence of global collapse, climate change could cause many millions of additional deaths by 2050 (WHO 2023).“

### Conclusion

- **"In a world with finite resources, unlimited growth is a perilous illusion.** We need bold, transformative change: drastically reducing overconsumption and waste, especially by the affluent ... and **adopting an ecological and post-growth economics framework that ensures social justice.**"

1. Towards the repolization of 'the economy'
2. Planning and degrowth
3. How to plan for degrowth
4. A bridging framework
5. Areas of degrowth planning policies

# 1. Towards the repolization of 'the economy'

The growth paradigm, why degrowth, why social-ecological planning

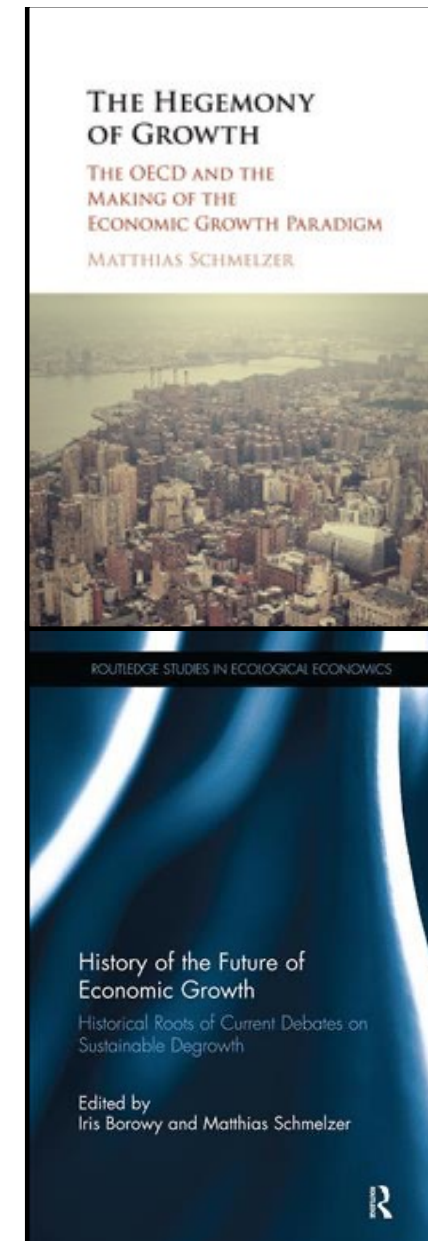
**Growth as an idea**  
GDP, capitalist realism, hegemony of the growth paradigm



**Growth as a social process**  
Class interests oriented towards increase, acceleration, and escalation



**Growth as a material process**  
ever-expanding use of land, materials, and energy



# Hegemony of growth

GDP and growth paradigm as key obstacle to economic democracy

Growthmanship and the “superiority of economists” (Fourcade et al. 2015)

”... only this focus on growth, with its assumptions that an ever-expanding pie would conveniently provide increasing portions to the poor [. . .], has made it possible to submerge the issue of distribution. [. . .] But if at some point the economic pie ceases growing, then the focus of public attention will inevitably turn toward the manner in which it is shared.” Hazel Henderson 1973

## THE HEGEMONY OF GROWTH

THE OECD AND THE  
MAKING OF THE  
ECONOMIC GROWTH PARADIGM

MATTHIAS SCHMELZER





# Growth misinformation discourses

- growth as freedom
- growth as destiny
- growth as good
- growth as welfare
- growth as technological progress
- growth as precondition for innovation
- growth as stability
- growth as geopolitical standing
- growth as security
- growth as environmental protection

## Growth as good

Growth as freedom

Growth as development

Growth as destiny

Growth as environmental  
protection

Growth as natural

Growth as  
precondition for  
innovation

Growth as  
technological  
progress

**Growth as necessary**

Growth as security

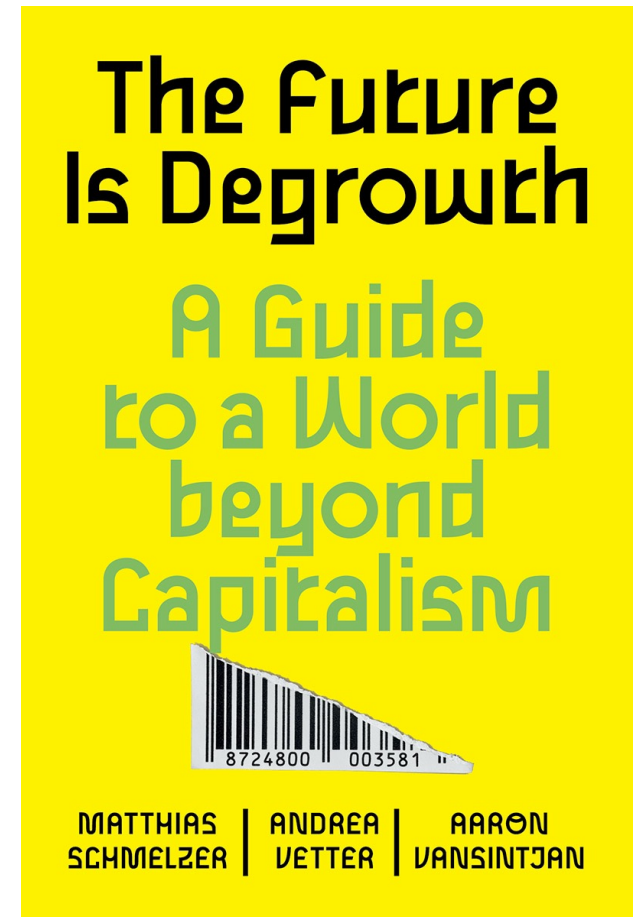
**Growth as remedy**

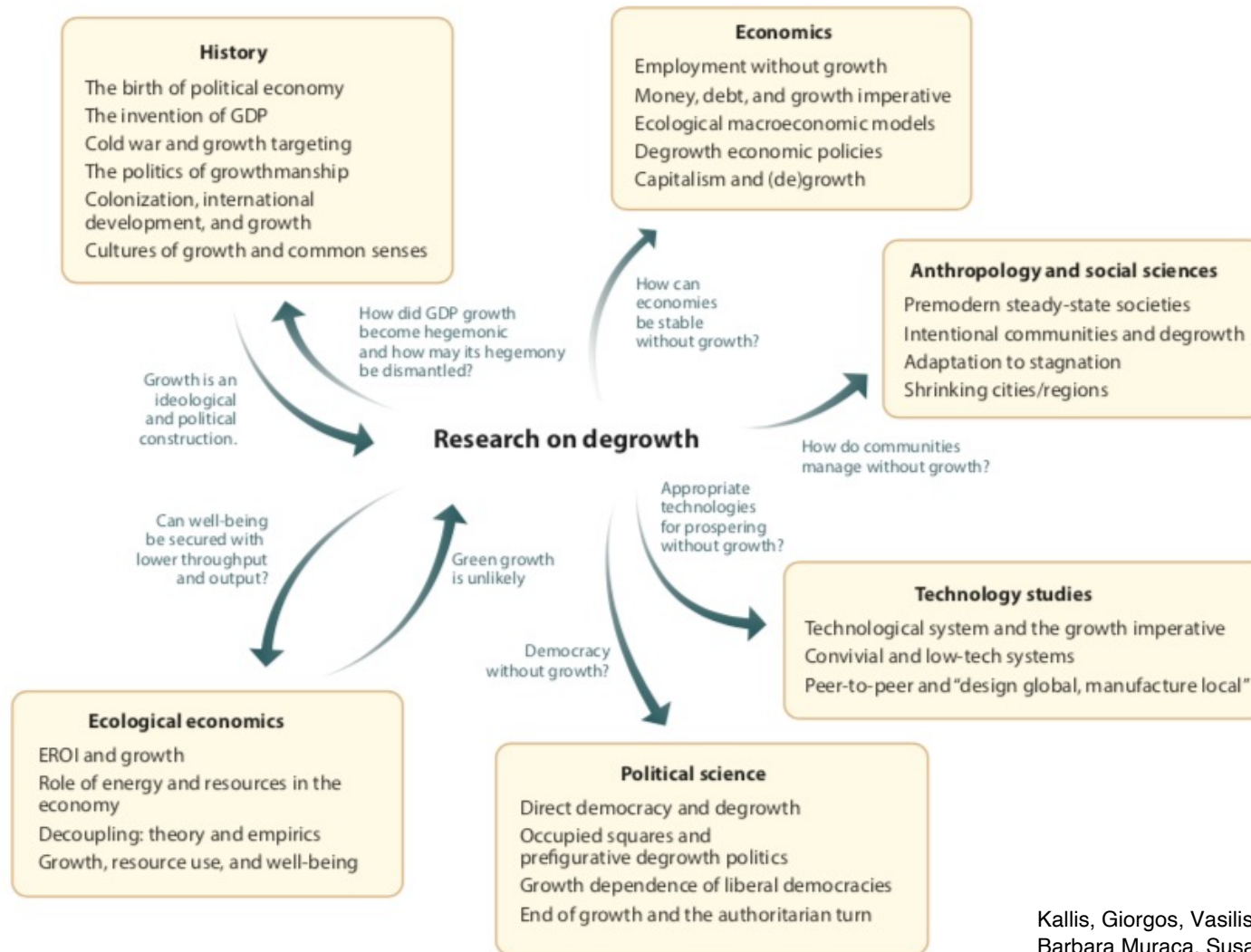
Growth as geopolitical  
standing

Growth as stability

# What is degrowth?

- Movement of activists, academics and practitioners
- Ensemble of growth **critiques**
- **Proposal** for the Global North to live well within limits
- Provocation, umbrella, mosaic of alternatives
- Key **misrepresentations**
  - Degrowth means the global South will remain poor
  - Degrowth aims at reducing all economic activities, less GDP is the goal
  - Degrowth means austerity, a politics of less, recession
  - Degrowth is against technology, innovation, and progress
  - Degrowth is mainly about individual renunciation and voluntary simplicity
- Emerging field of research

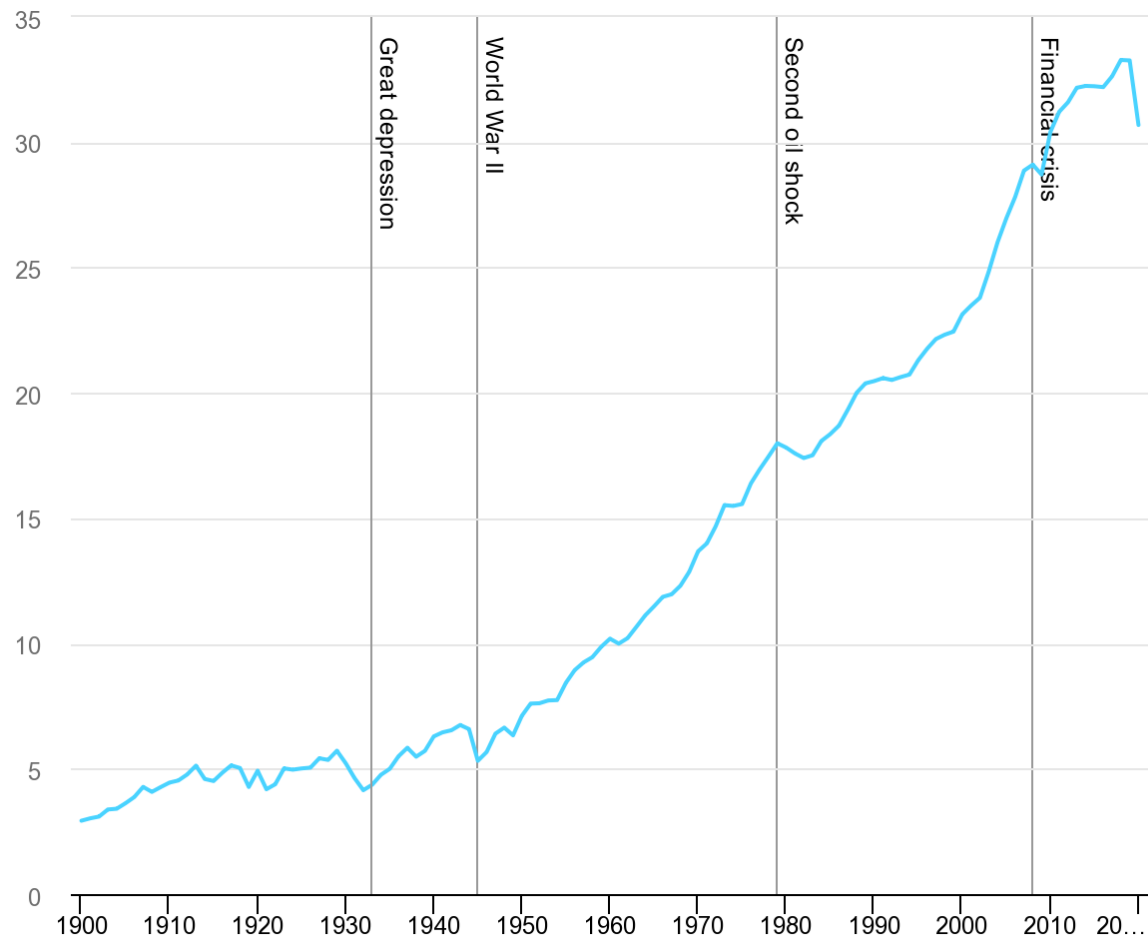




Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, und Matthias Schmelzer. „Research on Degrowth“. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43 (2018): 291–316.

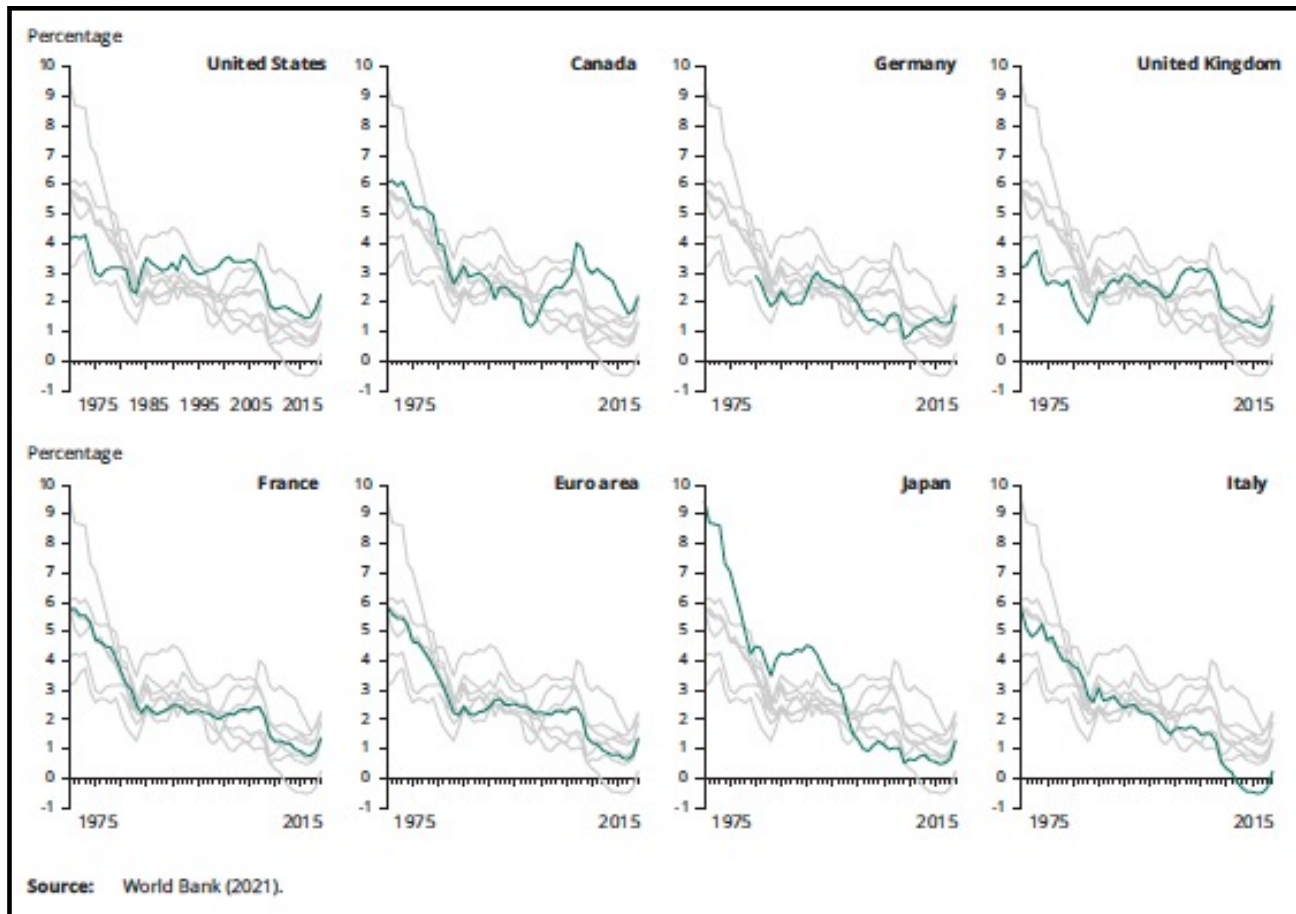
# Critiques of growth

<b>Critiques of growth</b>	<b>Economic growth...</b>
<b>Ecological critique</b>	... destroys the ecological foundations of human life and cannot be transformed to become sustainable
<b>Socio-economic critique</b>	... mismeasures our lives and thus stands in the way of well-being and equality of all
<b>Cultural critique</b>	... produces alienating ways of working, living, and relating to each other and nature
<b>Critique of capitalism</b>	... depends on and is driven by capitalist exploitation and accumulation
<b>Critique of industrialism</b>	... gives rise to undemocratic productive forces and techniques
<b>Feminist critique</b>	... is based on gendered over-exploitation and devalues reproduction
<b>South-North critique</b>	... relies on and reproduces relations of domination, extraction and exploitation between capitalist center and periphery



**Global energy-related CO2 emissions, 1900-2020, IEA**

# Secular stagnation



"The broader 'post-growth' concept seems highly relevant for Europe and other developed regions as they face increasing uncertainties about future GDP growth."

European Environment Agency 2021, Reflecting on green growth

## 2. Planning and degrowth

Some political and theoretical hurdles



# Degrowth and planning

Degrowth envisions ‘a *planned* reduction of energy and resource use to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being’ (Hickel 2021, 1)

‘by design, not disaster’ (Victor 2019)

Schneider et al. (2010, 11) contrast degrowth to “unplanned” recessions and define it as the ‘voluntary, smooth and equitable transition to a regime of lower production and consumption’

Schmelzer (2015, 264) defines degrowth simply as ‘a planned contraction of economic activity aimed at increasing well-being and equality’

Most definitions the decrease is explicitly qualified - if not as ‘planned’ - at least in similar terms such as ‘voluntary’, ‘managed’, ‘purposeful’, ‘intentional’, ‘deliberate’, or ‘democratic’ (Parrique 2019, 224)

Yet, planning as taboo.

Building on one current of degrowth thought: Kallis et al. 2020; Hickel 2020; Smith, Baranowski, and Schmid 2021; Akbulut and Adaman 2020; Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan 2022.

# The Future Is Degrowth

A Guide  
to a World  
beyond  
Capitalism



MATTHIAS | ANDREA | AARON  
SCHMELZER | VETTER | VANSINTJAN

Frederick Engels on Disarmament—EDITORS

# MONTHLY REVIEW

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2023

AN INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST MAGAZINE

## planned degrowth ecosocialism & sustainable human development

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN BELLAMY FOSTER

Degrowth & Socialism  
GÜNEY IŞIKARA & ÖZGÜR NARIN

Planning Degrowth  
KENT KLITGAARD

Global Poverty & the Case  
for Democratic Socialism  
JASON HICKEL  
& DYLAN SULLIVAN

An Ecologically Sustainable  
& Democratic Economy  
MARTIN HART-LANDSBERG

The Communal Alternative  
in Venezuela  
CHRIS GILBERT

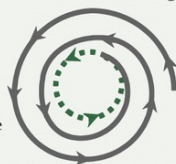
The Ecosocialist Mode of Cooperation  
NICOLAS GRAHAM

On Technology & Degrowth  
JASON HICKEL

Democratic Planning for  
Degrowth  
MATTHIAS SCHMELZER  
& ELENA HOFFERBERTH

9 Theses on Ecosocialist  
Degrowth  
MICHAEL LÖWY

Degrowing China—By Collapse,  
Redistribution, or Planning?  
MINQI LI



degrowth—what's in a name? YING CHEN

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egrowth Man

# SLOW DOWN

The Degrowth Manifesto



## KŌHEI SAITŌ

Translated by Brian Bergstrom

IEI SA

## Varying reasons for the neglect of planning

- i. Steady-State Economics
- ii. New economics of prosperity
- iii. Anthropological critiques of growth

To avoid these pitfalls, we argue for neglecting both pitfalls  
by focusing

- a) on in-kind, non-market-mediated forms of planning  
and
- b) on multi-level, fractally integrated and subsidiary  
planning institutions that mediate the local with  
society-wide and global institutions.

### 3. How to plan for degrowth

Building on and going beyond existing concepts to achieve wellbeing within planetary boundaries

# Deliberating limits and need satisfiers

planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009) and doughnut (Raworth 2017) delineate humanity's 'safe and just space'

but neither ecological limits nor just need satisfaction are objectively given

should be subject to social deliberation

need to 'plan the doughnut'



Raworth 2017

# Provisioning systems

link biophysical planetary processes and wellbeing outcomes

encompass material and socioeconomic dimensions, such as physical infrastructure, technology, economic relations and intricate forms of governance

social-ecological reorganisation of provisioning systems is what post-growth ecological planning is about

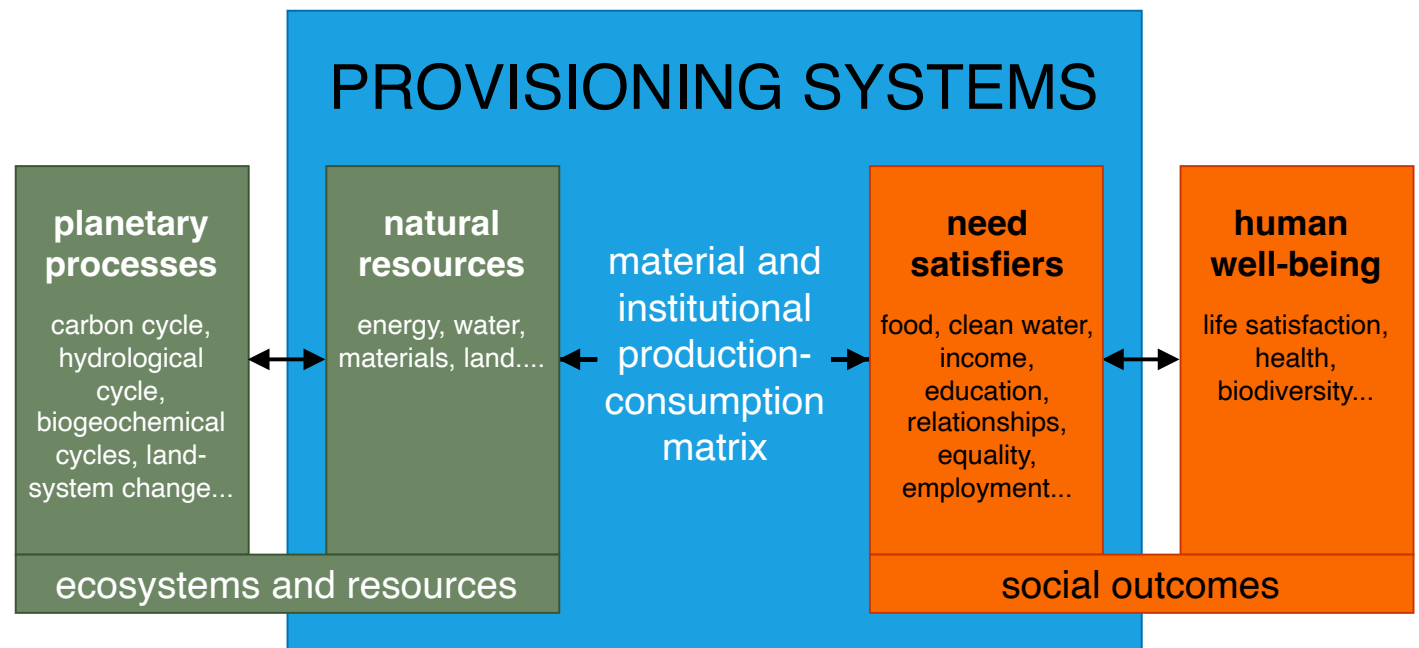


Figure adapted from O'Neill et al. 2018.

# The goals of planning provisioning systems within the doughnut

## Setting and effectuating limits and priorities

Define types of need satisfiers, their distribution as well as the organization of the provisioning process

## Ensuring democratic participation

Integrate diverse positions through participation of multiple groups of interest, sectors and organisations at different political and geographic scales, including but not limited to experts

Planning institutions designed to tackle existing inequalities and disadvantages, e.g. due to race, gender, or class

## Organizing and fairly sharing meaningful and necessary work

Estimation of the amount and type of work required to produce what is deemed socially desirable and ecologically viable

Match estimation with the capabilities and relative appetite of individuals

Account for wage labour and uncommodified work in households and communities

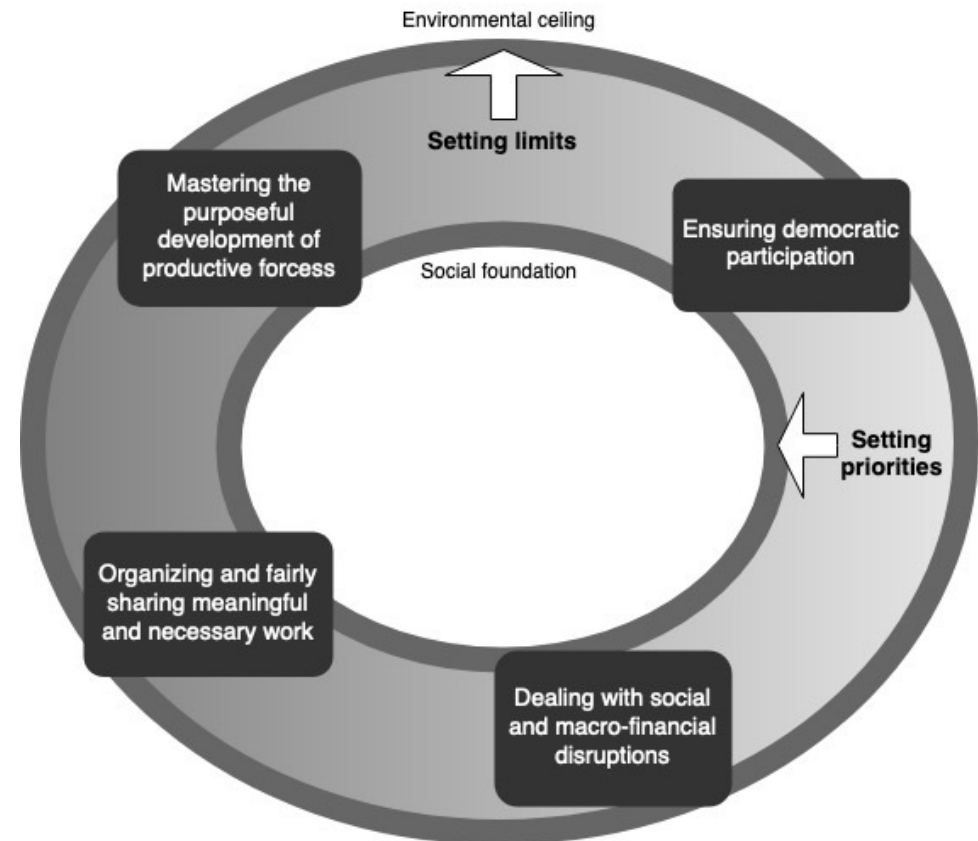
## Mastering the purposeful development of productive forces

Technical models, technologies, organization of labour processes and changed ownership structures that prioritise sustainability, usefulness and desirability rather than profit, e.g. 'convivial technology' (Vetter 2017)

## Dealing with social and macro-financial disruptions

Necessary speed and scale of transformation carries risk of ruptures, e.g. unemployment related to phasing out of whole industries, asset stranding, etc.

Macroeconomic coordination can help prevent full-blown socio-economic crisis



## 4. A bridging framework

for planning provisioning systems within safe and just operating space



# A bridging framework

Our kind of institutional design

## Not an ideal model

a readily available inspiration

building on already existing institutions

including markets, firms, community networks, public institutions, state apparatus, etc..

enabling the emergence of alternative ones

## A multiscalar stack (Bratton 2016)

Planning apparatus as canvas upon which autonomous and diversified social relationships flourish.

distinctive levels of planning according to the subsidiarity principle

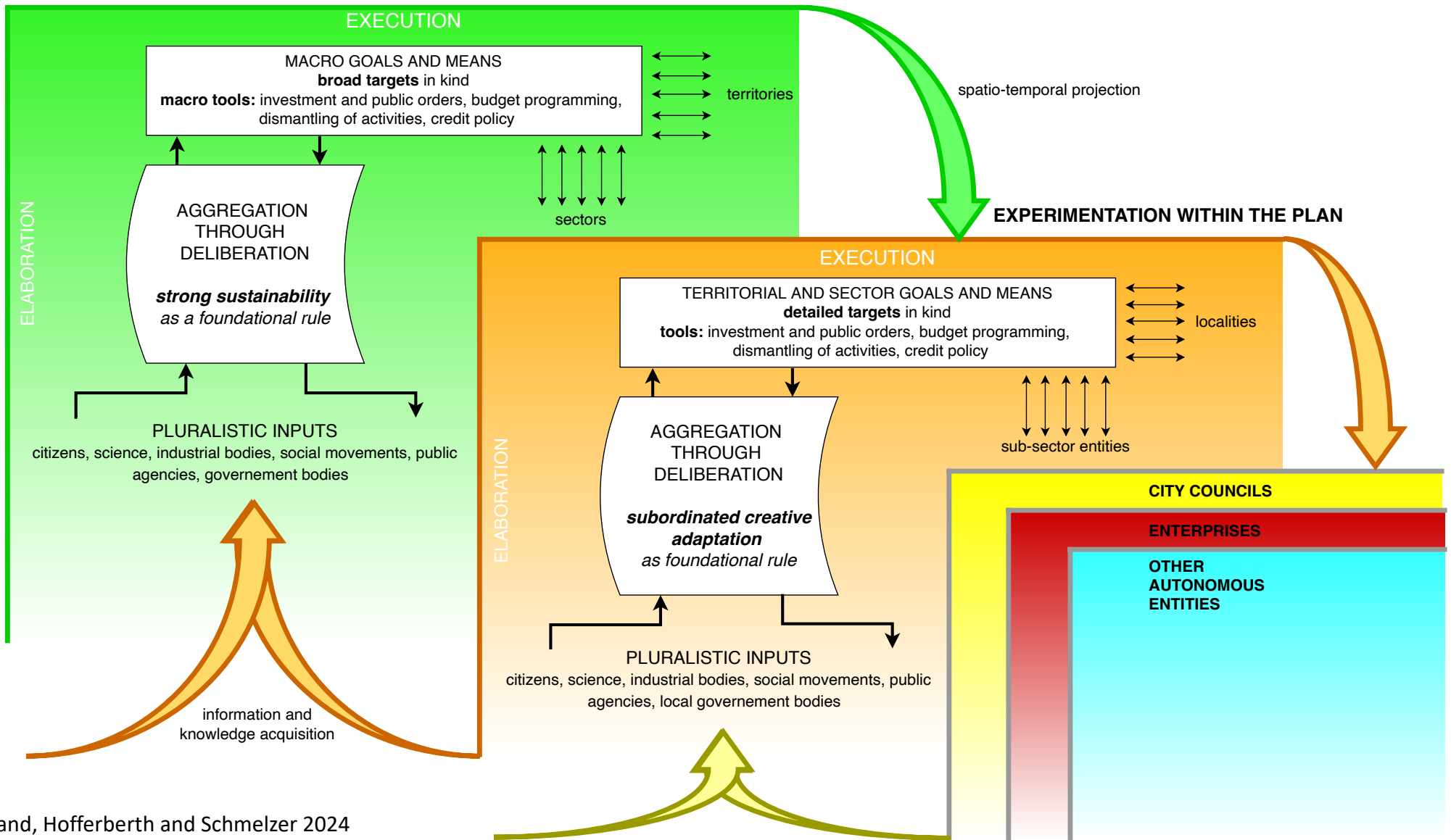
## Top-down in limited sense

decisions are nurtured by the inputs from the lower level

in addition to other specific sources of knowledge and information (scientific bodies, professional entities, etc..)

a wide range of decisions are not centralised but made by individuals and local structures

**DESIGN AND DEPLOYMENT OF THE PLAN**



## 5. Areas of degrowth planning policies

# Planning for degrowth

Radical policies for non-reformist reforms

## 1. Selective flourishing and downscaling of production:

caps on emissions and resource use, moratoria, ecological tax reform, socializations, publicly organized deaccumulation

Public provisioning, direct government financing, and preferential tax treatment, increase public spending (MMT)

## 2. Planning social provisioning and equality

Universal Basic Services

redistribution, taxes, reappropriation, caps on maximum income and wealth disparity

## 3. Planning technological development

Convivial technology

connectedness, accessibility, adaptability, bio-interaction, and appropriateness

## 4. Global justice and reparations

contraction and convergence

ecological reparations



## Ecological Reparations and Degrowth: Towards a Convergence of Alternatives Around World-making After Growth

Matthias Schmelzer<sup>1</sup> · Tonny Nowshin<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

Faced with multiple crises, recent years have seen the rise of degrowth as a newly emerging field of research on alternatives to development in the Global North, as well as increasing calls for ecological reparations to the Global South to address the harm done by colonial, capitalist, and extractivist development over the past centuries. This article makes a twofold argument about the need to closely interlink these. Degrowth and ecological reparations discourses, policies and related movements could gain from strengthening their connections and a mutual integration of core perspectives and demands. On the one hand, we argue that degrowth needs to develop into a global justice perspective by integrating demands for (ecological) reparations, freedom of movement, and a global-justice oriented reshaping of the international economic system—demands most prominently articulated from Global South movements. Without this global justice outlook, degrowth risks becoming an inward-looking, provincial, localized, and eventually exclusive project within Europe and the Global North. On the other hand, demands for reparations—strongly articulated from the Global South—could benefit from incorporating the call for degrowth in the Global North. Without this call—which can, of course, be articulated by using different terms—the reparations agenda risks a key opportunity to address core structural and systemic drivers of extractive processes.

**Keywords** Climate justice · Decolonization · Post-growth · Social movements · Social-ecological transformation

In recent years, as the climate crisis is resulting in increasingly more devastating catastrophes and rich countries fail to reduce emissions fast enough, the concept of degrowth for the Global North is gaining more attention. At the same time, demands to materialize reparations to the Global South are on the rise. There is a strong intersection between degrowth and reparation arguments—an alliance, we want to argue, that is essential to both. In essence, we want to make a twofold argument about the need to closely interlink degrowth and (ecological) reparations. Both the discourses, sets of policies and movements related to degrowth as well as those related to reparations could gain from strengthening their connections and a mutual integration of core perspectives and demands. Yet building these links demands careful work of alliance-building that takes differences of power,

access to resources, and intersectional social hierarchies into account (Kothari et al. 2014).

On the one hand, degrowth should develop into a global justice perspective by integrating demands for (ecological) reparations, freedom of movement and a global-justice oriented reshaping of the international economic system—demands most prominently articulated from Global South movements. Climate reparations are policies and measures taken by a state or corporation to redress past and present systematic injustices related to the climate crisis and to rebuild the (world) economy in ways that ensure climate justice, well-being, and equality for all globally. Without this global justice outlook, degrowth risks becoming an inward-looking, provincial, localized, and eventually exclusive project within Western Europe and the Global North—one that focuses on securing decent living within Northern regions that are involved in 'degrowth', but that is insulating itself from the catastrophes of the climate emergency unravelling in the most affected areas globally (Schmelzer et al. 2022). Going one step further, we argue that failing to integrate a decolonial approach can lead to a risk of degrowth being misused and imposed on the Global South in limiting its

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# Transformation strategies



**Nowtopias**



**Ruptural  
strategies**



**Non-reformist  
reforms**

Thank you for your attention!