Prefiguring Degrowth

Confronting Power, Accumulation, and Ecocide

Nishikant Sheorey

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The Beyond Growth Conference

From 15–17 May of this year, much of the academic Degrowth community gathered at the EU Parliament in Brussels for the Beyond Growth Conference. While it wasn't the first of its kind—there had been gatherings organized similarly in previous years—something seemed special about this year's event. There was an energy to it that was obvious even to those of us who were participating remotely, and it seemed to be a sort of coming out party for degrowth; a culmination of several years of steady growth (sorry) of what is becoming a real degrowth movement. Over the course of the conference, a multitude of politicians, scholars, and activists spoke on a variety of components of the degrowth concept from a range of perspectives. And make no mistake, there were throngs of interested people eager to hear what they had to say.

The highlights of the event, to me, were the presentations from some of the scholars present, including such degrowth 'celebrities' as Giorgos Kallis, Jason Hickel, Julia Steinberger, Kate Raworth, Farhana Sultana, and Dan O'Neill, as well as the passionate words of the youth activists who were invited to speak and brought with them a much-needed sense of anger and urgency. While some of the politicians involved clearly didn't have a very good grasp of the basic concept of degrowth, overall the technical knowledge on display was top-notch. The 'why' of degrowth—built on the conclusions of several decades of research on biospheric boundaries—was made absolutely clear. In other words, the argument in favor of degrowth was articulated very well, backed as it was by an abundance of empirical research.

The socio-political analysis, on the other hand, was a bit of a mixed bag, with the sharpness of any systemic critique likely blunted by the institutional setting in which the conference took place. When one's host is the state, it's admittedly difficult to be particularly radical in one's analysis. That being said, I think there could have been better articulation of the underlying systemic causes of the growth imperative. While there were some notable mentions of the relation of growth to capitalism and colonialism, the mechanisms could probably have been better explained and stated more bluntly. That being said, it was pretty clear that the majority of speakers (and attendees) understood the significance of these two systemic foundations of growth, at least at a superficial level. The greater impact of the contextual limitations was on how the path forward was envisioned.

The core issue here is that the state-hosted event incentivized articulation of state-centric solutions, though I'm not convinced that the vision presented would have been significantly more radical given a different setting. The overarching theme of the conference was state-mediated universalization of services, centered on concepts like UBI, maximum income, redistribution of wealth, reduced work hours, and right to repair. In a word: policy. To me, it seems, this needs to be transformed into a more radical critique that advocates for the abolition of wage labour, money, and capitalism and calls for the decommodification and (re)commoning of everything—a radical shift away from not just the mechanics of contemporary socio-ecological formations, but change in the foundational elements of societal organization itself. What this shortcoming indicates to me is that there is far too much uncritical faith in existing institutions, liberal democratic governance, and the social democratic mindset.

I was encouraged to see that I was not alone in making these critiques during and after the conference. It seemed pretty widely agreed upon, at least among the more radical (and notably, younger) attendees of the conference, that while this was an important step, a deeper analysis was needed lest degrowth—a fundamentally radical concept—be co-opted as greenwash. And I

am certainly not the first to write on the conference in this vein. Others have authored important pieces on the underlying class analysis, (anti)coloniality, and generally greater socio-political rigor needed in the movement to match the technical knowledge already present and make degrowth a reality. I wish to add to that analysis by drawing out and illustrating the throughline connecting growth, capitalism, and the state, such that the pathways articulated for degrowth don't run head-first into long standing systemic and structural obstacles.

What is Degrowth?

It is probably worth starting by briefly overviewing degrowth. I won't go into too much depth here; there are plenty of great books on the topic that I can point you to, and I have previously written about it myself in Protean Magazine[1]. For the purposes of this article, I'm going to be a bit counterintuitive and work backwards. I will begin by describing the nature of degrowth—the 'what' of it—so that later on I can articulate the 'why': the basic socio-ecological problem that demands such solutions, attempting to explain that problem of growth at a fundamental level. This discussion will, in turn, help support the proposed pathways to the solution—the 'how'—which will be discussed at the end of this article.

The concept of degrowth is really quite simple. It is, at its core, just the reduction of society's overall metabolism to a level consistent with biospheric boundaries through pathways that prioritize societal wellbeing. That's really it. It is **not** austerity, recession, or eco-fascist population reduction. In fact, it's a shift away from the current orthodox socio-economic worldview to one where those descriptors don't even really make sense because the evaluation of societal wellbeing has fundamentally changed. Of course, that's a very high level, abstract description, and as is always the case the complexity—the messiness—comes when you introduce social dynamics to the mix and ask how any of this would actually happen. But before we get to that question of how, let's talk a bit more about the what—because visions of what the solutions look like can vary quite significantly.

At the Beyond Growth conference, and indeed, in much of the current academic degrowth literature, degrowth is presented as policy change. The solutions proposed are things the state could do to facilitate degrowth—such as limiting work hours, ensuring right to repair and reuse, using taxation to redistribute wealth and implement social provisioning programs, that sort of thing. While these proposals sometimes push the boundaries of what's considered 'reasonable' in today's dominant socio-political culture, the pathway they utilize is thoroughly aligned with mainstream conceptions of how change happens. And I'm not against these sorts of policies being implemented—they can certainly be helpful. However, in my opinion, for reasons I will return to later, those kinds of solutions are a) not sufficient in and of themselves, and more importantly b) not likely, certainly not in the time period required given our current climate and ecological crises.

And so the conception of degrowth that appeals to me goes deeper. It is not just a rethinking of policy, but of governance—and more to the point, of social organization—itself. While discussing the nature and magnitude of the changes necessary to build a truly just society would easily fill several books, what's relevant to the matter of degrowth is the consideration of economics in its truest sense: a socioecological analysis of societal organization as it pertains to (natural) resources, the health of the biosphere, and social wellbeing. And as far as those economic con-

siderations are concerned, there are two which are central to the discussion of degrowth: first, how access to resources is organized and managed, and second, how we determine the purpose and prioritization of production. In mainstream economic discussion, those decisions are mostly left up to some combination of private markets and the government, with some variation in how democratic or planned that process is. Direct access—returning of all resources and resource generators to a communal commons—and decommodification—production for the purpose of direct usage rather than market exchange—is rarely discussed, even in the most well-intentioned and socially-oriented capitalist circles.

Ultimately, the solutions need to go deeper than what's typically discussed, because the problem is more foundational that is usually acknowledged. In order to truly solve the myriad problems degrowth aims to address, we need to have much more nuanced and radical analysis of those problems. We live in a socially and ecologically complex world consisting of layers upon layers of systems, and so we need to keep digging through those layers to find the fundamental source of our problems. Only then can we find a combination of principles and methods that may truly work.

The Growth Imperative: Understanding Capitalism

So, if the 'answer' is degrowth (or, eventually, post-growth), then the problem must be growth, right? And that is correct. But it's worth being nuanced and maybe even a bit pedantic here, because 'growth' is an extremely broad term. Two questions arise when considering growth. Firstly, growth of *what*? And second, perhaps more importantly *why must there always be growth*? The answers to these two questions are closely related via their mutual connection to a capitalist economic system. To address the first question, the growth we're concerned with here is the growth of society's physical metabolism—its flows of material and energy—which of course cannot be infinite on a planet with finite resources and rates of resource regeneration. The answer to the second question is simply that growth—specifically self-reinforcing cycles of accumulation and exploitation—are intrinsic to the basic mechanisms (and social relations, as we'll see later) of capitalism.

But perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself. To explain why unbounded, unsustainable metabolic growth is not just incentivized by but *required* for the function of capitalism, it would be best to start with an overview of capitalism itself. While capitalism (like any social phenomena) takes on a wide variety of characteristics depending on the context, its fundamental relationship dynamic is fairly simple: there is a class of people—capitalists—who enclose commons (including but not limited to typical 'means of production'), hoard them, and charge rents on their usage. Where once people were able to use their labour in conjunction with these freely accessible resources to sustain themselves, there is now a fee: capitalists grant access to these resources at the cost of a (usually significant) percentage of the value of whatever the worker produces. What's left to the worker is his wage; what is taken by the capitalist can then be used to expand and improve the enterprise, and, ultimately, to increase profit. This is of course a somewhat simplified description, but it is the core mechanism, and it holds the key to understanding the growth imperative.

The critical takeaway is that capitalism enables the extraction of value from labour, that that extracted value can be used to increase capital holdings, and that the increased possession of capital opens the way for greater profit. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle, fueled by the goal

of ever-increasing profit and the need for firms to outcompete others. There are many obvious injustices in this system—not least of which is the inherently hierarchical and coercive social dynamic and the theft of the product of workers' labour—but this accumulatory spiral is what is most pertinent to the material discussion of growth. This dynamic of infinite capital accumulation is inherent to the capitalist system, and because it always ultimately rests on a material foundation, *will always correspond to metabolic growth.* As mentioned above, this makes it incompatible with a thriving biosphere—that material growth will always, at some point, transgress ecological limits.

The contention that the growth imperative cannot be extracted from capitalism—and that full decoupling of production from ecological impact is ultimately impossible—is probably not too controversial among a generally leftist audience. But this is where things start to become a bit more complicated. Because capitalism has really only been around for a few centuries—but the metabolism of human society has been growing much, much longer than that, and that's not just due to increases in population. So then, there must be even more fundamental systems and social relations that drive accumulation and growth. The big one, of course, is colonialism—the buildup to modern capitalism. It is the extraction, enclosure, and centralized accumulation associated with coloniality that helped create the foundation that capitalism as we know it is built upon.

The Early Foundations of Capitalism and Ecocide

But extractivism, overproduction and resultant ecological degradation have occurred even in contexts where colonial relations (at least as we think of them today; forms of colonialism stretch back millenia) were not directly responsible for accumulation of material wealth. For literally thousands of years, people have exploited their ecosystems past sustainable thresholds and have faced the consequences—soil erosion and fertility decline, depletion of flora and fauna populations, water resource misuse, aridification, disease, etc. It's theorized that some of the earliest 'civilizations' struggled and even declined at least in part due to the deleterious effects of their patterns of extraction and consumption on their local environments. Instances of anthropogenic ecological degradation are ubiquitous across both time and place, and it's worth learning about these histories—and trying to pinpoint what they had in common. In doing so, we can begin to understand what kind of social relations drive over-consumption and over-extraction.

In his books *World Ecological Degradation*[2] and *Ecological Futures*[3], Sing Chew lays out a number of examples in detail. One which I think is illustrative, demonstrating just how far back this trend extends, is the case of Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley Civilization, and the broader network of 'civilizational' centers in the 3rd millennium B.C.. In these regions, as cities developed, a clear core-periphery dynamic emerged in which urban centers became specialized in manufacturing and processing while their hinterlands provided raw resources such as minerals. As this dynamic evolved, cities also became centers of trade—and thus, wealth, accumulation, social stratification, and increasing consumption. The drive to meet the economic and social-reproductive needs of cities necessitated a great deal of resource extraction, and the result of this process was slow but unmistakable ecological degradation. In southern Mesopotamia, deforestation for timber (to be used locally as well as for export), aggravated by overgrazing of land for wool, led to siltation issues in irrigation systems. In the Indus Valley, monoculture agriculture and extensive cattle grazing led to significant degradation of the land, particularly soil, as well as biodiversity loss.

Not coincidentally, these were some of the first recognizable states—and it is in these formations that were made clear the processes of accumulation and growth that we must get a handle on.

It is important to note here that these early state formations—and the ecological degradation they so frequently brought about—were not inevitable. They are not, as anthropologist and political scientist James C. Scott describes in *Against the Grain*[4], a natural, logical progression of human social evolution. In fact, recent archaeological and anthropological evidence generally leads to the conclusion that early state formation was messy and heavily resisted by stateless peoples; that the power of early states was intermittent and far from guaranteed; that states have played a far less significant and straightforward role over the span of human history than dominant narratives depict; and that people regularly fled these states if they could, as state formations brought just as many negatives as they did positives to life in their territories. It is important to recognize this precarious and uncertain nature of states in the face of its propaganda to the contrary, because we need to understand that not only is the state neither beneficial nor necessary, not only that alternative forms of social organization exist, but that we have it in our collective power to actualize a radically different society.

Capitalism and the State: Two Sides of the Same Accumulatory Coin

In this section I will make the case that capitalism is not just a predictable but essentially inevitable outgrowth of the functioning of states. But before we get there it's worth taking a moment to develop a rough definition of the state—because, historically, conceptualizations of the state have varied widely. One of the most common (partial) definitions of the state is an entity that maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Another conceptualization of the state is an organization with uniform laws and methods of governance operating in a distinct territory. Neither of these definitions is *wrong*, per se, and I appreciate the latter's hint towards the homogenizing dynamic of states, but neither, in my opinion, get at the underlying social dynamics. The obvious response to either definition is the question of "Why? To what end?" What is the purpose of the monopolization of violence? Administrative legitimacy? Directive authority? Why the formality (and uniformity) of governance, and why the obsession with distinct, neatly bordered territories?

A better and more useful definition, in my opinion, is one that is perhaps more broad overall but that correctly identifies the social function and purpose of the state. The state can be described as not just a particular organizational formation or set of institutions, but a more abstract assemblage that acts *through* these manifestations as part of its operation. It is important, then, to not simply identify the forms of the state, but of its core function: the coercive exercise of power. Borrowing from Deleuze, the state is essentially a machine composed of a variety of processes, dynamics, and institutions that collectively serve to accrete power for the purposes of continuously defining a field over which political control can be implemented.[5] It's important to note here that, in contrast to a more traditional Marxist conception of the state, this kind of state exists not merely as an outgrowth of certain forms of economic production, but as an overarching system of multi-faceted domination, and to that end is not the *product* of a given economic system (i.e. capitalism), but the *source* of it.

The central social process of the state, then, is the accretion and centralization of power in a small class of people who are able to wield that power in a self-reinforcing cycle. And because this reinforcement of power typically depends on the domination and exploitation of both people and the environment, the state is inherently a coercive entity. We may then recognize that these dynamics are effectively *identical* to those underpinning capitalism, with power being the 'thing' being accumulated in the course of state function while wealth—or capital—is what's accumulated in the case of capitalism. In both cases, the thing being accumulated can be leveraged to increase itself. And what's more, power and wealth are essentially interchangeable in the context of social organization, because the ability to control material flows grants social power—there is thus no substantial difference between a dominating, coercive state and a merely 'administrative' one. We are not simply talking about an abstract connection here, but a concrete, socio-material one. Capital accumulation effectively **is** power accumulation, and so capitalism is in essence the material manifestation of the dynamics of the state.

Because of the ways state function and capitalism are built on the same social dynamics, it can be said that state organization—and any process that harnesses it—*prefigures* capitalism. I'll take a moment here to discuss the concept of prefiguration because the idea is central to anarchist praxis—and I'm soon going to be arguing that an anarchist approach is the *only* approach that can truly deliver degrowth. Prefiguration is, basically, the idea that a method of social change that utilizes and embodies a particular set of social relations can only produce as outcomes social formations built on those dynamics. We can't use coercive, hierarchical, accumulatory methods, for example, because those dynamics reproduce themselves, and will always result in systems that are similarly coercive, hierarchical, and accumulatory. We on the broad left are (correctly) interested in systems, but it's important to remember that systems aren't static or reified from granular social life—to the contrary, they reproduce themselves via agents whose actions reinforce their underlying social patterns. If your process for change, for example, involves social stratification and power imbalance, you will only produce hierarchical systems because people and institutions with power have the tendency to maintain the dynamics that benefit them—i.e. their institutionalized ability to coerce others. This is in essence the concept of social reproduction—the way in which social structures reproduce and propagate themselves—applied to theories of radical social change.

"Unity of means and ends." This is a central tenet of anarchism, and is the practical application of the concept of prefiguration. It is the conviction that our revolutionary methods, whatever form they may take, must embody the sorts of social relations we wish to see in our ideal society, because we understand that these relations constitute systems that are self-replicating and self-proliferating. If we want a liberatory society, a truly communist society (in the sense of a classless, stateless, moneyless society devoid of commodification and enclosure)—which I believe is the only type of society in which degrowth and post-growth can actually occur—then we must organize and fight for that society using liberatory means embodying communist relations. This becomes even more important when you realize that society is a dynamic, ever-evolving construction. So, in the words of Ursula LeGuin "But what if there is no end? All we have is means." And it's worth noting here that this is not an issue of purity—I'm not advocating for these kinds of means because I refuse to settle for less (though maybe I do!)—but because I am concerned about efficacy. It is naive (not to mention socially illiterate) to believe that communism and anarchy can be brought about through coercive, hierarchical, essentially capitalist means—which is what the state approach entails in practice.

To see prefiguration in action, particularly when concerned with the results of harnessing the state, one need only look at the failure of the state socialist projects of the twentieth century and their universal reproduction of capitalist relations.[6] They are, unfortunately, great examples of what happens when we try to abolish capitalist systems absent a solid social analysis, particularly when it comes to power. When we attempt to use state power to abolish the state and all of its manifestations, it is all too easy to reproduce capitalist relations of various forms but with different aesthetics. It doesn't matter how we label the class character of the state, a state is still a state and so the core dynamics always shine through. This is the reason why the state socialist projects of the last century have all produced a system wherein one class hold and controls the commons, while another must sell their labour; where productivity, extraction, and shallow "efficiency" are centered; and where the measure of wellbeing still largely revolves around material consumption in some form. This kind of system is, needless to say, incompatible with degrowth, and it is the only system the state can produce. Ultimately, capitalism is just the latest, most advanced, and most profound material manifestation of the state's accretive nature; capitalism must be abolished but it's not the root problem.

Can the State Solve the Problems it Causes?

So, that brings us to the central question: can states be harnessed to solve the problems that states have created? More specifically, can the state be used to enact degrowth? The short answer would be: unlikely, given the way states and the capitalist systems they prefigure share an accumulatory logic that is fundamentally incompatible with degrowth. But it's worth looking beyond abstract theory and examining how these social relations translate into real incentives, both generally and with regards to degrowth in particular. Starting with a general context, it is worth stating that the state (and power generally) is not a neutral tool which we need only place in the right hands—due to the social relations discussed above, there are inherent processes that states prioritize.

The first, highest, and most obvious priority, is the accretion and maintenance of power. This is trivially true of all states, regardless of the intent of their formation—even those that are meant to be democratic and purely administrative must maintain some degree of outward power and authority in order to ensure that their actions appear legitimate to those affected. This is why even the state's pursuit of what might be considered beneficial 'public good' works usually entails the implicit (or explicit) threat of strict enforcement via systemic or even direct violence. The manifestation of this drive to maintain power is twofold. The first and often most obvious is the ability to wield force legally and at a massive scale. The second, more subtle but sometimes more pervasive, is the ability to control the flow of material resources—either directly, through state ownership of resource commons and logistical distribution systems, or indirectly through the backing of the capitalist systems and its agents. It's not a coincidence that there's an almost universal overlap between those who wield political power and those who hoard capital. The separation between state and capital, where it exists at all, is thin, and usually illusory.

Thes second priority, closely related to the first, is the simplification of that which the state must control. In order for a centralized, hierarchical entity to be able to control, or even just 'administer' a population, that population must be clearly defined and delineated—in other words, made 'legible' to those who seek to exercise that control or perform that administration. This

occurs via two mutually-reinforcing pathways. The first is the simplification of that which is surveyed: it's impossible for a rigid and disconnected central authority to fully and accurately map out the dynamic rhizomatic complexity of real, organic social ecosystems, and so what is recorded then forms a vastly simplified static general model. Next, through its actions, the state then seeks to actively mold its subject to that model, often forcibly. This process results over time in the loss of the sorts of messy processes and relationships that make communities resilient and effective.

In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott likens this process to the replacement of natural forest with monoculture through the process of 'scientific' forestry: the removal of most of the elements of an ecosystem, resulting in a loss of overall function and utility, but the with the benefit (to the state) of increased legibility; replacing complex value with quantifiable outputs.[7] A not incidental aspect of this is the way that the simplified monoculture forest, having lost the mechanisms of its resilience, is dependent on the forester for its well being; similarly the state's approach tends to atomize human populations and makes people dependent on state processes. These effects make it difficult if not impossible to utilize localized, contextual knowledge, which in turn severely restricts the possibility for just and appropriate social transformation.

Based on those inherent, prioritized processes, I would argue that states are fundamentally, structurally incapable of delivering degrowth and post-growth. Because of these synergistic dual tendencies towards accumulation (and the extractivism it requires) and reductive homogenization of socio-ecological systems, the over-production and over-consumption-driven ecocide we are witnessing isn't simply an *incidental* problem that just requires some recalibration of relations within the statist framework, but a process intrinsic to the state model that necessitates a paradigm shift.

Some might suggest that state-centric approaches are the only ones capable of dealing with our multiple overlapping crises in a timely manner, due to the state's capacity to operate at scale and force necessary changes, but let's take a quick look at what that might mean. One suggestion is that states could immediately nationalize, restructure, and degrow the most problematic, extractive, and wasteful industries. This is appealing in theory, in large part due to the relative simplicity of the revolutionary strategy it implies ("capture the state!") but there's plenty of reason to doubt that this would actually happen in practice.[8] State ownership of resources and industry still ultimately results in a capitalist relationship—with the state and its bureaucracy taking the place of private bosses in order to maintain power, with the exploitative wage-labour relationship kept intact. As a result, the drive to control and exploit these resources remains, with the incentives to focus on productivity and commodification still firmly in place. Degrowth in this context would restrict one of the state's methods of maintaining power, and so will not likely occur.

Let's look at a relevant example: how states have addressed (or failed to address) climate change. This is an issue that makes the close relationship between the state and capitalist industry abundantly clear: as the crisis worsens and calls for an urgent and radical response increase, all states have abjectly failed in their response. In western liberal democratic nations, this takes the form of governments backing fossil fuel capital, almost universally without fail. It's a case of mutual interests and class solidarity: capitalists require the state in order to operate—enforcement of property norms, bailouts, and suppression of popular dissent—while states rely on the smooth functioning of capitalist relations to maintain power, as it gives them influence over material flows that would not exist if resources were held in common. And it should be noted that this is

true even for nations in which various degrees of nationalization of the fossil fuel industry has occurred, because, as previously mentioned, all that this does is erase the already permeable wall between state and capital. The incentive to extract, exploit, produce, commodify, and engage in colonialism and imperialism will persist so long as there are institutional structures enshrining the possibility of exercising power over people and ecosystems, whether that's capitalism or the state in any of its many forms.

Post-Growth Anarchy

So, if degrowth is unlikely to be enacted through state action, then what can we do, and how do we go about actually doing it? To start, I'm going to get right to the point and talk about some of the main categories of advocacy that degrowth organizing entails, and later on get to the principles by which we should engage in that work. The overarching theme in degrowth organizing should be hindering and supplanting the systems and social relations that underpin growth, not just through personal changes but by facilitating and normalizing socio-cultural shifts at a societal level. This entails, in essence, building examples of radically different systems where we live, so that we can all see the benefits of radical change in a way that is immediate and impactful, rather than distant and abstract.

To me, the fundamental change underpinning degrowth is a fundamental alteration in how we organize stewardship of natural resources. The root of growth is the tendency of enclosed resources governed by rentier relations to be further perpetuated and capitalized through the accumulatory and self-reproducing logics of capitalism. The solution, then, in the broadest sense, is re-commoning—bring all resources back into public ownership. Side note: I don't like the term ownership because of what it implies about the nature of the relationship between humanity and its environment, but for the purposes of this sort of discussion, it's probably the most appropriate term. In any case, what re-commoning means in practice is likely to be heavily context-dependent, but bringing land, housing, energy and other infrastructure into community stewardship are good examples, and movements around these issues are already fairly common, so there's plenty to build on here.

This process of re-commoning leads into the second major aspect of degrowth: decommodification. The production of goods specifically for monetary exchange leads to a lot of inefficiency and overproduction by essentially turning production into a speculative endeavor, incentivizing a process of creating things that aren't necessary but that people can be convinced are necessary. The result of this is an absolutely immense amount of waste, in terms of goods not being designed to last, goods not being used even for the short lengths of time they were designed to be used, and things that could be used not being used at all. The alternative to this system of production for exchange and profit is a system of production oriented towards direct usage in which the opportunity for profit does not even exist. And this commodity-less system is the natural result of socio-ecological formations where all have access to resources held in common. The ability to exploit resources for profit rests on the ability to hold those resources for ransom, thus denying people the prospect of supporting themselves directly via their labour and forcing them to sell their labour to survive.

I'll take a moment to note here that I am intentionally being somewhat abstract about the specific actions and processes of organization, because these are things that tend to be extremely

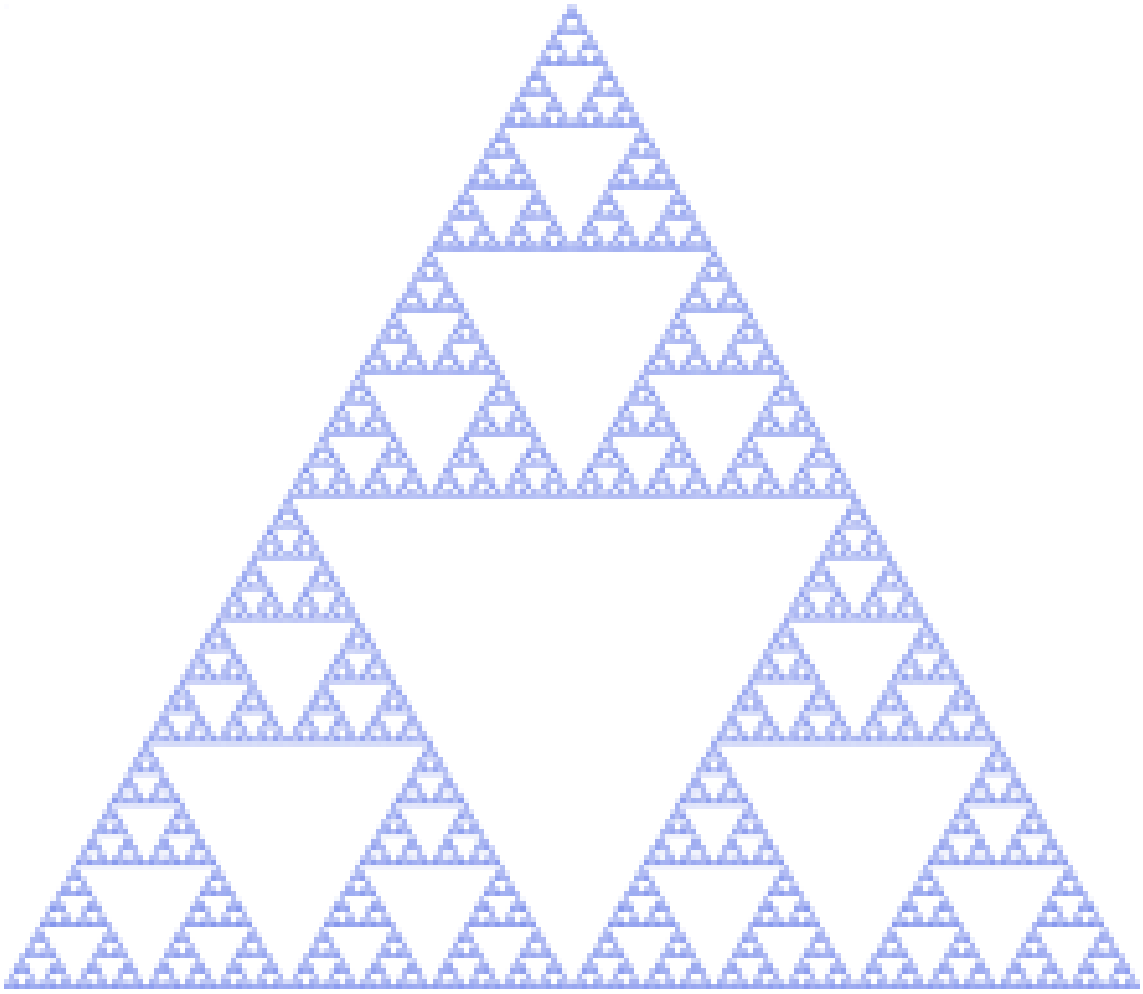
context-dependent and dynamic, and in general I try to avoid being prescriptive. It is up to communities to figure out what methods of organizing suit them and their goals best; my only concern is that we not practice social relations in the course of organizing that unintentionally reproduce the systems we seek to abolish. That being said, there is plenty of existing writing on the specifics of anarchist practice, from how to implement democratic processes to how to most effectively perform various types of actions. Including this sort of tactical and procedural discussion is somewhat beyond the scope of this article, but I may come back to it in a future piece.

The important overarching "methodology," though, is that the methods of organizing towards these ends must be prefigurative. Which is to say, whatever work needs to be done to achieve these goals must embody the principles we'd like to see as the foundation of an 'ideal' society and avoid the sorts of means associated with capitalist and statist projects, but there's no denying that in the desire to "win," some of those methods may seem appealing. For example, I don't think degrowth is compatible with the function of a traditional party-based, mass organization-oriented revolutionary approach, because in those sorts of formations, which tend to produce a political class whose job it is to wield power, is born the incipient state and ultimately the seed of capitalism. This is actually my greatest concern at the moment: much of the modern left seems intent on pursuing the kinds of revolutionary organizing methods that have resulted in nothing but failure over the last century. They're tempting because they seem like neat, straightforward methods, but therein lies the problem: the actual world, composed of messy social and ecological formations, is not neat or simple, and methods that do not recognize this truth, or seek to intentionally flatten that complexity, will not succeed. Only in understanding and respecting it, tailoring our methods to embrace flexibility and dynamism, can we begin to make progress.

It's important to note that I'm not advocating for a sort of liberal individualist method that emphasizes changing our own personal patterns of consumption. It's clear that we face a systemic problem that requires a systemic solution. We can't just react to the symptoms of the system, but must address the underlying causes. It's not enough to be anti-capitalist or even anti-state; we must prefigure radically different forms of relations that can supplant the coercive, hierarchical ones that are dominant today. It is important to note though that bringing about systemic change in a prefigurative way will entail changes in all aspects of life, including personal consumption. Those alterations themselves will not precipitate systemic change, but we must understand that the future we want lies on a foundation of radically different social and ecological relations, and practicing those relations *now* is part of building the future in a socially resilient way.

On that note, this is probably a good time to present an *extremely* brief overview of anarchism (my understanding, of course, which is not necessarily representative or identical to others', and is ever-evolving). In short, anarchism is not simply against capitalism, but **all** coercive hierarchical systems and their social manifestations, at all scales, including patriarchy, racialization, human domination of nature, and of course, the state. Anarchism is rooted ultimately in a fundamental analysis of power. As the name implies, anarchism is deeply concerned with hierarchy, and the way the power relations derived from hierarchical systems shape all social (and notably here, socio-ecological) interactions. Relatedly, it is also interested in how these coercive systems reproduce themselves, whether via intentional agents or inadvertent prefiguration, as well as the way different manifestations interact and overlap. One conceptualization of this that I find particularly useful is the idea of power as fractal: recursive and self-reproducing at all scales. Visually, power is a Sierpinski triangle—broad and large scale power arrangements are composed of smaller and more intimate arrangements possessing the same dynamics. Think of the big triangle,

for example, as the state, as patriarchy, as humanity-over-nature, while the triangles within it are formations such as academia, NGOs, local governments, the family unit, etc. This conceptualization makes one thing clear: the social power dynamics that make the state prone to accumulatory logic *also exist in other subformations*, and so we cannot be simply anti-state but also against all manifestations of this hierarchical arrangement, at every scale, institutional or otherwise. If we are not, the overarching manifestations will eventually be reproduced through the function of the more personal and intimate versions.



Having described the ways capitalism, the state, and hierarchical systems of all kinds are tied inextricably to accumulation and growth, it makes sense to apply the anarchist lens in theorizing and organizing a suitable response. It is, ultimately, a holistic and truly radical approach that is necessary in addressing such fundamental societal issues, and in my opinion it is only anarchism that gets close to that sort of analysis. A Marxist lens, for example, could of course be useful, but is neither a broad enough nor a deep enough analysis to be sufficient in and of itself. But it's critical that we not stop at the theoretical underpinning of a solution. Life is complex, uncertain, and dynamic; nothing is assured to go to plan, but it is important that we at least begin to discuss the broad strokes of what we can do. My view is that there is a very obvious clear set of practices that can be taken and adopted by people organizing along flexible but generally anarchist lines. While anarchism is often somewhat nonspecific so as to not be prescriptive, certain principles are fundamental and should be held to because they constitute a form of organizing that can be effective without embracing the sorts of social relations that lead to the reproduction of the state and capitalism: we need coordinated heterogeneous networks of autonomous democratic communities. What does that all mean? Well…

I'll start with the importance of heterogeneity, as it is often ignored, particularly when it comes to any sort of centralized, mechanistic, top-down approach to organization. There are two components to heterogeneity: first, heterogeneity within a given community and setting, and second, heterogeneity within a broader movement. In both cases, heterogeneity has a couple of benefits. First, the presence of a diversity of perspectives increases the chances that all needs will be voiced and taken into account. This is particularly the case when this diversity is included within specific movement spaces. This, in turn, ensures that change will not come purely at an abstract, theoretical level. Greater inclusion of varied perspectives leads to a better accounting and meeting of needs which leads to greater buy-in, and, ultimately, the kind of cultural change that makes systemic change resilient and sustainable. Secondly, heterogeneity, particular at a larger scale, ensures that degrowth will occur in a way that is context sensitive. We must understand that different people, communities, ecosystems, and geographies come with different needs and capacities; ensuring that people are able to speak to their own contexts will lead to a degrowth that is both effective and just.

Next, let's talk about autonomy—what I'd consider to be the core element of anarchism. It's important to note here that autonomy isn't just a vulgar invitation to do whatever one likes but rather the assurance that one always has control over what happens to them and is free from coercion. After all, when we say "no gods, no masters" we are not just demanding our own agency but are cognizant that we must be aware of the ways in which our actions may impinge on the autonomy of others and act accordingly—no masters includes ourselves! To that end we must reject rigid external coercion and instead govern ourselves via flexible, adaptive, and context-sensitive intersubjective agreements. There's a degree of social responsibility and internal self-discipline required here. Autonomy in the context of coordinated organization means respecting *each other's* autonomy and thus coming to decisions that are mutually beneficial and subject to consent. This is also true at a larger level, because in order for degrowth to be effective it must be targeted and appropriate. People and communities must be able to experiment and decide what works for them, free from the authoritative influence of external decision makers, especially insofar as they are the ones who know the context and will face any consequences.

To that point, It's also important to understand the need for coordination and networking both within and between communities. It's important that people have the autonomy to do as is

needed in their specific contexts, but the problems degrowth seeks to address are massive and global and so require a networked response. There is much to be gained from solidaristic, consensual relationships between communities and movements. Perhaps the first benefit that comes to mind is the ability to share. We can support each other materially through sharing of resources; something that is particularly useful when done in a way cognizant of colonial dynamics. We can also exchange knowledge: sharing theory, having discussions of what has worked and what has not, training each other in relevant skills, etc. These connections should also be harnessed to coordinate concrete action. While we often inhabit discrete contexts in one arena, we share other arenas, and overall are looking to address global and intersectional problems. Being able to coordinate whatever work we are doing, whether that be a campaign to bring an electrical grid into community control or engaging in eco-defense and direct action, will always be beneficial, even when working within heterogeneous networks with those with whom we may not fully align on ideology or operational priority. Ultimately, we do need power to challenge hegemonic systems, but that power should take on a distributed form in which aggregated power is significant but cannot be concentrated into a few hands—a decentralized, leaderless, and insurgent mass movement.

Finally, I'd like to talk about democracy, because I'm not referring to what passes for democracy in liberal democratic governance or democratic-centralist 'mass organization' contexts. I mean a system in which every individual has agency and a voice, in which no one is coerced into going along with something they find fully intolerable, and which is direct, situational, and adaptive. It's important to note that this can take different forms in different contexts, and it is ultimately up to people to decide what forms of decision-making work best for them. But generally speaking, truly democratic processes should be based on consent: not everyone needs to be fully enthusiastic about a given proposition, but everyone must find it acceptable. To this end, it is critically important that a decision-making process be based to some degree on consensus and always be aware of and responsive to dissensus. It is also worth considering whether every decision, at any scale, requires a formal democratic process. It is probably true that governance of large commons that involve and affect a broad range of communities and are of critical importance (say, management of water systems or land) will require a formal process (It's worth learning from Elinor Ostrom's work here)[9], but once overarching decisions have been made, there is a place for more informal and spontaneous decision-making based on more abstract trust-based relationships.

Which brings us back to movements, and particularly the ways in which we can embody these principles in practice. This is where I think there's a bit of a distinction to be made between a generalized 'degrowth movement' and broader social movements that include degrowth ideas in their theory and praxis. I think the former could lead to somewhat narrow and thus ineffective organizing, while the latter, more organic approach, will be more effective and resilient in the long run. The foundation of any effective movement for social change is the building of (distributed, autonomous) social power, which can then be leveraged in whatever ways the communities involved find most appropriate. All of which is to say, the focus shouldn't be so much on building a specific homogeneous degrowth movement as it should be supporting the development of rhizomatic grass-roots power and encouraging the people involved to include a degrowth lens in their broader analysis. While I think a lot of common radical organizing falls under the umbrella of 'degrowth,' it is better to support people organizing around whatever specific issues

impact themselves most in a way that facilitates degrowth than it is to try to convince them that degrowth is the primary impulse and goal.

Social Movements for Degrowth

I'll start to wrap this up by noting that there is nothing particularly novel about what I've said here—there are plenty of instances of socio-ecological struggle all across the world, wherever you look, and a great many of them, intentionally or otherwise, organize along anarchist or at least anarchic lines. My goal here is to present this thinking in a way that makes sense to those who do not; whether that be academics with minimal involvement in grass-roots struggle, or generic organizations without a strong connection to any particular issue or context who may then evaluate organization through the lens of abstract theory. I want people to understand that while the most visible facets of the degrowth movement as it is currently recognized consist mostly of these somewhat-disconnected groupings, there are numerous movements out there who may not call themselves degrowthers but articulate values that align well with degrowth and would likely be amenable to the addition of a degrowth component to their advocacy, if it isn't already present with different presentation. Frontline communities organizing against urban environmental injustice, indigenous land and water defenders, eco-direct-action groups, housing rights organizers, and others would all likely be interested in an appropriate conversation about and adoption of the degrowth analysis. In his book *The Solutions Are Already Here*[10], Peter Gelderloos highlights many such movements and the way they, though not homogeneous, overlap on many principles; degrowth could well be one of them.

For people, then, who may not already be directly involved in such movements, the question becomes how to appropriately engage. I do not think it necessitates the creation of new formal organizations, although it could, if those organizations are structured in ways conducive to respectful solidaristic existence within a movement ecosystem. Either way, the core idea would be to engage in organizing where we are—identify the most pressing issues facing the communities we are part of, and work on those issues, favoring support of existing organization and in a way that incorporates a degrowth analysis, on a foundation of general community organizing. This, of course, should not be done in isolation, and should involve healthy coalition building locally and regionally as well as the establishment of inter-movement links at a broader level. What exactly any particular person or group's involvement will be will depend on their knowledge, skills, abilities, and of course, the context.

Which brings me back to the Beyond Growth Conference and the question of how academics can most appropriately utilize their knowledge and skills. As I mentioned in the intro to the piece, there was a great abundance of well-thought-out and developed technical knowledge and expertise. What was lacking was socio-political analysis, particularly with regard to social change methodology. There was less engagement with existing struggles than I would have hoped, which is a problem, because degrowth implies the sort of radical systemic change that requires deep socio-cultural shift; this shift cannot come into being through a superficial, technocratic approach. But in my opinion, this is a lack that's pretty easy to address, at least in theory. What it requires, on the part of academics, is essentially an acknowledgement that though they may indeed have a lot of very useful expertise, it is often narrow, and that specific knowledge does not make them experts in revolutionary strategy. What we as academics have to understand is that we cannot

take up vanguardism—we have to engage with struggles on a supportive, solidaristic basis, and not reinforce the existing hierarchical, extractive, and exploitative power relations that so often reproduce themselves in academic work. Doing so will allow us to interact with struggle in a way that is mutually beneficial, results in bi-directional learning, and is capable of effecting actual change. In other words, scholars absolutely should engage with social movements—the potential for mutual benefit is very high—but must learn to do so in an appropriate way with a focus on non-hierarchical collaboration and epistemic equality.

On that note, I think it's critical for all, but especially academics, to take an anarchist approach to epistemology. It is entirely possible to write a tome on this topic, but the part I want to stress is that academics need to be more open-minded about how we approach non-traditionally-academic forms of knowledge production and learning. All too often the learnings and practices of social movements are considered scientifically suspect, and as a result 1) a lot of situated practical knowledge gets overridden, to the detriment of effective organizing and 2) what could be mutually beneficial relationships get ruined due to the paternalism and patronizing attitude on display. What is needed is a respect for (and elevation of) the epistemic standing of the subaltern, an open-mindedness to ideas and strategies not common in academic and other institutional spaces, and the intersubjective building of an ontology that integrates a range of perspectives.

So far I've been focused on academic engagement with social movements, but it's hard to look at the history of these kinds of interactions and not see the parallel to some forms of traditional leftist vanguardism, and so this is something contemporary socialists should take heed of as well. Similar to a significant portion of academic engagement with social movements, a significant proportion of the recent history of leftist organizing is suffused with a paternalistic and technocratic high-modernism. The belief that we need merely grant power (which is seen as mechanically neutral) to experts such that they may design and implement revolution and usher in an ideal society, in addition to underpinning the strategy of state capture, also backs other ineffective organizing methods including hierarchical, asymmetrical vanguardism and the centrality of the (mass) party form. This perspective follows from a weak analysis of power that produces an approach that, as previously noted, has not, does not, and cannot produce stable and lasting social change, as it quashes the complexity and dynamism that underpins resilient communities and movements (not to mention reproducing the social dynamics of the state and capitalism). It is the worst example of scientism—cloaking authoritarian organization in an appeal to science—but is in actuality markedly *un*scientific, ignoring contemporary sociological, anthropological, and ecological knowledge. This approach must be abandoned in favor of non-hierarchical and rhizomatic forms of engagement and organization if we are to make lasting progress towards a just, thriving, post-growth world.

Conclusions

Ultimately, while degrowth is undoubtedly a material process that benefits from technical expertise, aggregate metabolic growth (and consequently, degrowth) is a socially driven phenomenon; as such we must develop and apply a radical socio-political analysis. The core theme that arises when analyzing growth in the context of socio-political formations and processes is the mutually-reinforcing connection between social power, control of material wealth, and accumulatory / growth-driven logics. This insight aids us in a couple ways. First, it identifies the root

cause of growth, and thus grants us a more clear and foundational understanding of the problem. Secondly, because a socially determined problem must necessarily be addressed through a social approach, it helps us pursue solutions that won't inadvertently reproduce the problem. And to that end, there are two major points I would highlight as take-aways from this piece.

The first is that state-oriented pathways to degrowth are unlikely to materialize or be effective because the state, due to its intrinsic social relations and prefiguration of a capitalist system, presents immense structural obstacles when it comes to moving away from a growth-oriented mindset. To the extent that the state and its agents desire to pursue degrowth, this is likely to be either obstructed (if state actors stick to a truly radical vision of degrowth) or co-opted into a method for greenwashing some version of capitalism. The best possible outcome I can see is a mild social-democratic solution consisting of various policies pertaining to reduction of consumption, which is both insufficient and brittle due to its failure to target the fundamental relations underpinning growth.

This leads to the second point: growth isn't just a matter of the state and capitalism, but the social relations through which those systems function. Any system wherein some person or body has power over others—ie, a hierarchical system—*will result in a growth drive*, because those with power have an incentive to further accrete power, which in turn leads to material accumulation, and thus, growth. What this then implies is that the means we utilize to address growth (and advocate for degrowth) must avoid hierarchical organization, lest we reproduce those social relations and thus accumulatory socio-economic arrangements. In other words, our organizing and advocacy must be prefigurative: it must flow through formations that minimize the incentives for accretion of power and wealth and instead promote a needs-based distribution of material throughput.

This article is, in essence, a call for people to be active and engaged in organizing towards a just society sustainably inhabiting a thriving biosphere. It's particularly directed at scholars who I think have valuable expertise to contribute but could go about their advocacy more effectively by collaborating with relevant social movements, many of which already exist and would benefit from support, but really it applies to everyone. Get involved! But please, do so appropriately, in ways that are respectful and supportive of ongoing struggles and that do not force the kinds of social relations that are ultimately at the root of the issue we're trying to address. I'm not the type of person to say, full-throatedly, that we can solve the massive challenges society faces, and I'm aware that the approach to organizing I have laid out is by no means an easy one—it's often messy, confusing, and certainly not conflict-free. But that complexity is part of its strength. And I will say this: allowing ourselves to engage in struggle as equals, eschewing the orthodox relations of contemporary society and embodying the principles we want to see in a post-growth world, will give us the best shot at the best possible outcome.

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Nishikant Sheorey
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