

# Degrowth: A Remarkable Renaissance

Saturday 17 February 2024, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2023).

**There has been an upsurge of interest in degrowth -a long-discussed strategic alternative to climate chaos and not just from the radical left. It is experiencing a renaissance at the moment, driven by the relentless rise in global temperatures and the resulting climate chaos.**



It was the theme of a three-day conference in May entitled "[Beyond Growth 2023](#)" which filled the main hall of the European Parliament with mostly young and enthusiastic people. It was organised by 20 left-leaning MEPs and it was opened by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen.

According to [The Economist](#) report the young audience 'whooped and cheered' when it was proposed that some form of de-growth will be necessary to avoid societal collapse."

In July, Bill McKibben - the veteran environmental campaigner, founder of 350.org, and prolific author - had a major article in the [New Yorker](#) strongly advocating degrowth from an historical perspective.

Numerous books supporting degrowth - to varying degrees and stand points - have been also published recently from the left: *The Case for Degrowth* by Giorgos Kallis et al; *Less is More: how degrowth will save the world* by Jason Hickel; *Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* by Kohei Saito; and *The Future is Degrowth* by Matthias Schmelzer.

A recent book opposing degrowth is *Climate Change as Class War*, by Matt Huber - from, in my view, an ultra-left and voluntaristic position. He has reviewed himself in the current edition of *Jacobin*.

Growth is the driving force of the environmental crisis. Over the past 60 years the global economy has grown at an average rate of 3% a year, which is completely unsustainable. John Bellamy Foster has pointed out that a 3% a year growth rate of would grow the world economy by a factor of 250 over the course of this century and the next. Over the same period the global human population has risen from 3.6 billion in 1970 to 8 billion in 2022.

Such growth rates are incompatible with the natural limits of the planet, and will ultimately defeat any attempts to resolve the environmental crisis that fail to deal with it.

An early attempt to analyse this issue was undertaken in 1970 by Donella Meadows and a team of radical young scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was published in 1972 as *The Limits to Growth Report*.

*The Meadows Report*, as it became known reached the monumental conclusion that: “if the present growth in world population, industrialisation, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continues unchanged,” the limits to growth on the planet will be reached sometime around the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The most probable result “will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.”

It sold 12 million copies world-wide, was translated into 37 languages. and remains the top-selling environmental title ever published. It also became the driving force behind the emergence of the ecology and green movement in the 1970s, and the degrowth movement itself.

It was remarkably accurate as Bill McKibben notes and it’s conclusion puts us exactly where we are today, facing increasing frequent climate related societal breakdowns that may soon become generalised.

McKibben also notes that Ursula von der Leyen directly referenced to *The Meadows Report* at her opening speech in Brussels: “Our predecessors”, she had said, “chose to stick to the old shores and not lose sight of them. They did not change their growth paradigm but relied on oil. And the following generations have paid the price.”

*The Report*, however, was ignored by the socialist left, with a few exceptions. Tony Benn’s *Alternative Economic Strategy* of the 1980s, for example, made ever-faster economic growth its key demand. No wonder the trade unions and the Labour Party remain dominated by growth productivism today because they have never been challenged by the left.

William Morris - the outstanding environmentalist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century - had also gone unheeded when he raged against useless and unnecessary production. In his lecture “How We Live and How We Might Live”, delivered in December 1884 in Hammersmith - he raised the issue of how to live dignified and fulfilling lives without the need for mass produced commodities and consumerism, and what kind of future society could best provide such an approach.

What degrowth offers is a planned reduction of economic activity, within a different economic paradigm, and first and foremost in the rich countries of the Global North. Giorgos Kallis puts it this way in *The Case for Degrowth* (page viii): “The goal of degrowth is to purposefully slow things down in order to minimise harm to human beings and earth systems”.

Jason Hickel in *Less in More* (page 29) -- tells us that degrowth is: “a planned reduction of excess energy and resource use in order to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe and equitable way”.

The adoption of such an approach will need a mass movement involving everyone who is prepared to fight to save the planet on a progressive basis, including environmental movements, Indigenous movements, peasant movements, farmers movement as well as trade unions and progressive political parties. It must demand that the big polluters pay for the damage they have done. This means heavily taxing fossil fuels in order to both cut emissions and to ensure that the polluters fund the transition to renewables as a part of an exit strategy from fossil fuel that redistributes wealth from the rich to the poor, and is capable of commanding popular support.

Such an approach must be the cornerstone of ecosocialism and an ecosocialist strategy designed to

save the planet from ecological destruction and create a post-capitalist, ecologically sustainable, society for the future.

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**P.S.**

• Against the Current No. 228, January/February 2024:  
<https://againstthecurrent.org/degrowth-a-remarkable-renaissance/>

This [article](#) was written for the current edition of the [Green Left's](#) publication *Watermelon* in advance of the Green Party conference. September 2023

<https://www.ecosocialistdiscussion.com/2023/09/16/degrowth-a-remarkable-renaissance/>