

Degrowth Reading Group

November 2024

The theme of this reading group session is “communicating about degrowth”. We want to explore and practice as a group how to be effective communicators about degrowth, especially when faced with different or even opposing understandings of the problems we face or visions of the future.

We’ve selected some readings from the explore.degrowth.net website that give some guidance for how to be prepared to speak effectively about degrowth, as well as a video of a presentation by Jeff Bezos where he shares his analysis of the world’s problems and his (personally lucrative) *techno-optimist** solution. When watching the video, we encourage you to think about how you might address his argument from a degrowth perspective and how you might convince a member of his audience that a different path is needed to address the issues we face today.

Materials to review for the group discussion:

- [9 tips for talking to your family about degrowth over the holidays](#), 1 page (below)
- [Degrowth: Myths and Misconceptions](#), 4 pages (below)
- [Jeff Bezos talks about space](#) (2:10 - 20:20), 18 minutes

* **Techno-optimism** is defined by Marc Andreessen in his *Techno-Optimist Manifesto*: “We believe that there is no material problem – whether created by nature or by technology – that cannot be solved with more technology.”

9 tips for talking to your family about degrowth over the holidays

By Nathan Barlow ([original blog article](#))

1. **Stay respectful.** This should be obvious, but unfortunately when we're passionate about a topic and think we're 'right', there can be a tendency to tread into the dangerous waters of not communicating with care and compassion to others. So, first and foremost, let's stay respectful!
2. **Listen then speak.** Understanding the concerns, frustrations, and passions of those you're speaking to can help you to highlight the points of degrowth that are relevant for them. It's a lot to digest at once, so don't overload them and make sure you find the right entry-point.
3. **Keep it simple, and avoid jargon.** Many of us in the degrowth movement work and study in academia or have spent a lot of time around universities and our (over)usage of theoretical language shows it. Try to limit the usage of jargon unless it's really needed, because you will have to stop the flow of conversation to 'define' some of the words and it can create more confusion than clarity.
4. **Highlight real-world issues, not just theory.** Think in advance of some real-world issues that exemplify degrowth. For example, food waste. The unsustainability of the current food system is evident to anyone after a few visits to the grocery store dumpster. The injustice of not sharing the excess products with the workers or vulnerable people highlights the need for new ways to organize business.
5. **Provide basic statistics.** I don't personally memorize masses of statistics about the social and ecological crises, but remembering some can be very helpful to describe the severity of the situation. This avoids phrases like, "trust me- it's really really bad!" For example, in 2019 the Guardian reported that, "41% of global insect species have declined over the past decade".
6. **Relate the abstract to lived experiences.** In my hometown there is currently a massive takeover of the roads and parking lots by Amazon delivery trucks that have decided to establish a 'hub' here... Is an Amazon 'hub' really what this town needs? How would a degrowth vision address the challenges this town faces? If you can identify a lived experience like this one to contrast with degrowth, do so!
7. **Give bridging ideas.** While degrowth directly contests ideas like sustainable development, it can be helpful to begin from more commonly understood ideas and then explain how degrowth is different. For example, "degrowth is similar to sustainable development... but degrowth questions sustainable development's naïve hope that long-term environmental sustainability can be achieved alongside infinite economic growth."
8. **Avoid individual critique and shaming.** Avoid the trap of preaching or critiquing someone's way of life. Degrowth is not about each of us overcoming our individual shortcomings and acting better, it's about struggling collectively for new structures in society. I may be vegetarian and cycle a lot, but I also flew across the Atlantic to see my family for the holidays. Always remember these tensions and contradictions in yourself (and in society) when talking with others.
9. **Highlight the positives.** The holidays should not be a time for doom and gloom, so tell a story of success or hope. While the examples may be limited, incomplete and/or partial, it can show a way forward and even give your family/friend an idea of how they can get involved and affect change.

Degrowth: Myths and Misconceptions

Degrowth often sparks vibrant discussions and, inevitably, a fair share of misconceptions. It's a concept that challenges deeply ingrained notions of progress and success, leading to misunderstandings about its goals and implications. In our journey towards understanding degrowth, it's vital to clear the fog of these misconceptions which often cloud our vision and lead to critiques based on incomplete pictures. Here, we're trying to set the record straight, addressing common critiques, myths and misconceptions and clarifying what degrowth stands for to many.

Advice for Countering Misconceptions

As we navigate the complexities of transitioning towards a degrowth society, we must approach critiques and questions with openness, humility, and respect. We should recognise that the concept of degrowth can provoke a range of reactions, some stemming from genuine concerns, misunderstandings, or widespread misinformation in public discourse. It's important to remember that many critiques are valid and deserve thoughtful consideration.

Our goal is to foster a space where scepticism can transform into understanding through empathy, honest conversation, and the sharing of accurate information.

Economic Misunderstandings

Degrowth vs. Recession

Degrowth isn't about economic decline; it's a conscious shift from GDP-focused growth to enhancing life quality. Unlike a recession, which is unintentional and harmful, degrowth is a deliberate, positive change which puts people and the planet before profits. Degrowth then acknowledges that this will likely lead to a reduced GDP (although that is not the focus!).

Degrowth as Mini Capitalism

Degrowth isn't capitalism on a diet. It's not only about scaling down corporations or slowing down trade. It's a radical rethinking of our economic systems, focusing on local, regenerative, and community-based approaches, not just shrinking existing structures.

Degrowth's Post-Capitalist Vision Misconceived

Degrowth isn't about improving capitalism; it's about transitioning beyond it. It envisions a post-growth economy that is more equitable, slower in pace, yet richer in quality of life, operating within ecological limits.

Degrowth is Against Businesses and Markets

Degrowth doesn't oppose businesses and markets; it critiques the unsustainable and exploitative practices within capitalist systems. Recognising that trade and commerce have existed in various forms across cultures and history, degrowth advocates for markets that operate within ecological limits and serve community well-being.

Degrowth Means All Sectors Must Shrink

Overall, the world's economy has to shrink because we're using up Earth's resources too fast. Just relying on new technology isn't enough to fix this problem. However, some sectors and countries must grow (Global South, renewables, healthcare, education, etc.), and some must shrink (Global North, fast fashion, aviation, SUVs, etc.).

Societal and Cultural Perspectives

Degrowth is Contrary to Human Nature and Progress

Is our nature to progress? Maybe. However, degrowth argues that progress isn't about accumulating wealth, power, and status. Degrowth seeks to redefine progress to mean the enhancement of collective well-being and ecological stability, not just individual accumulation.

Degrowth is Utopian Idealism

Degrowth is utopian in spirit, not in naivety. It uses the idea of utopia as a critical tool to inspire debate and envision better alternatives. It's about striving for a better, adaptable world, acknowledging perfection as an unattainable and possibly undesirable goal.

Degrowth Demands Only Individual Sacrifices

Degrowth champions a collective endeavour towards sustainability, deeply rooted in community strength and mutual support. It's about enriching lives with connections to people and nature, not isolating individuals or demanding personal sacrifice without communal benefit.

Degrowth as A One-Size-Fits-All Solution

Far from prescribing a universal blueprint, degrowth acknowledges the rich tapestry of global cultures, philosophies and economies that have influenced it. It advocates for context-sensitive approaches that respect local conditions, traditions, and needs, ensuring that the path to sustainability is as diverse as humanity itself.

Innovation and Technology

Degrowth Stifles Innovation

Degrowth doesn't stifle innovation; it redirects it. Instead of focusing on commercial gains, like creating faster trading algorithms, it emphasises innovations that solve real community challenges, such as developing local currencies, improving renewable energy technology, shared resource networks/apps, medicinal advances, or community resilience technologies.

Degrowth Opposes Technological Advancements

Degrowth doesn't reject technology; it champions its democratic control. Technology should be a means to societal goals, not an end in itself. It advocates for inclusive, sustainable technology that serves the common good.

Degrowth is Regressive

Degrowth isn't a step backwards (it's not seeking to "bring us back to the caves or dark ages") but a step in a new direction. It challenges the linear narrative of endless progress and seeks practical and realistic solutions to our current systems that are on the brink of social and ecological collapse.

Governance and Empowerment

Degrowth Leads to Disorganised Societies

Degrowth is far from an anarchic vision devoid of governance. It calls for proactive policy-making and government intervention (particularly in international and geopolitical matters) to steer economies towards sustainability, equity, and care. It emphasises that systemic change is pivotal to achieving degrowth objectives. However, degrowth also pushes for greater community resilience and autonomy from the state.

Degrowth Equals Oppression

Degrowth is rooted in global justice and autonomy. It opposes any form of 'climate apartheid' or an "authoritarian green state". It is a collective, voluntary journey towards a more equitable world. It's about empowerment and participatory decision-making, not top-down enforcement.

Degrowth Restricts Personal Freedom

Far from restricting freedom, degrowth aims to enhance it by empowering individuals with greater decision-making power in their communities, workplaces, and municipalities, fostering environments where everyone has a voice and not just an elite few.

Work and Quality of Life

Degrowth Lowers Quality of Life

Degrowth is not about deprivation but redirection. It aims to address the excesses of consumption (think private jets, mansions and SUVs) in some parts of the world while ensuring basic needs are met everywhere. It's about balancing resource use so everyone can enjoy a good quality of life. It is the complete opposite of austerity-induced poverty. Many even use the term radical abundance to talk about the increases in free time, basic needs, relations and community.

Degrowth Equals Job Losses

The transition to degrowth is not about eliminating jobs but transforming the employment landscape to prioritise meaningful, sustainable and socially beneficial work. It envisions creating opportunities in sectors that enhance ecological resilience and social well-being, including greater workplace democracy, ensuring livelihood stability while moving away from industries harmful to the planet.

Degrowth is Anti-Working Class

Contrary to being anti-working class, degrowth supports policies that directly benefit workers by advocating for reduced working hours with living wages, job guarantees, and

improved quality of life with access to all your basic needs, ensuring the well-being and empowerment of all, especially those who have historically been marginalised.

Global Perspectives and Equity

Degrowth Wants to Keep the Global South Poor

Degrowth recognises that while many nations in the Global South need to use more resources to alleviate poverty, this doesn't require following the conventional path of GDP growth at all costs. It advocates for targeted growth where necessary, alongside degrowth among the elite and mega-wealthy, ensuring equitable resource distribution and sustainable development tailored to each community's needs.

Degrowth is Just a Form of Communism

Degrowth is not about adopting communism; degrowth opposes economic growth goals as a policy objective regardless of whether it happens in a capitalist or communist framework. Although both can sometimes be similar when discussing workplace democracy and ensuring basic needs are met, it's a distinct approach focusing on sustainability, equity, and well-being within diverse economic systems, advocating for a balanced relationship with our environment, not a specific political ideology.

Practicality and Action

Degrowth is About Individual Guilt

While personal choices play a role, degrowth underscores the power of collective action and systemic transformation. It's a movement built on the foundation of community engagement, democratic processes, and shared visions for a radically different future.

Degrowth is All Theory, No Action

Degrowth is grounded in practical, actionable strategies, many of which are already being implemented in communities worldwide. From local currencies to cooperative business models, degrowth is not just a theory but a living practice, demonstrating viable alternatives to the growth paradigm.

"Degrowth" The Name

Lastly, probably the most famous critique: "Degrowth" is An Unappealing Term. Some find the term "degrowth" off-putting, suggesting negativity or loss. But to many, it's a wake-up call, or what some have described as a "missile word". A term that shakes us out of complacency and makes us question something we have inherited as 'common sense'. The name also has the benefit of making it very hard to 'co-opt' or 'greenwash' like has happened with "sustainable development", for example.

To the skeptics, degrowth could answer with hope and practicality. It's not an end but a transformation, a path to a sustainable, equitable future. It's about reimagining progress, not denying it. So we invite you to join the conversation and engage with others who may have doubts and concerns. People's insights and questions are not just welcome; they're essential.