

Degrowth: with and against the Green New Deal

Gareth Dale | 28th October 2019



Radical action on climate change is at last on the agenda. The emphasis is on urgency and action and - for XR notably - 'truth.' Questions of long-term strategy are less clear, but strategy platforms have been advanced. Foremost among them are the Green New Deal (GND) and degrowth.

GND began as a slogan but has taken shape as policy programmes, advanced by the left of the US Democrats, by a coalition of [left parties in Europe](#), and by Britain's Labour Party.

Degrowth, likewise, works as a mobilising slogan. It connects networks of activists. It draws on traditions of anarchist and socialist utopian community (or 'phalanstery') building. Its foremost agents are the squatters and agro-ecologists, "the [nowtopians and eco-communities](#), ... the back-to-the-landers who work the land, or the city dwellers cultivating urban gardens or occupying the squares."

Ideas

Both groups inhabit large tents. Degrowth encompasses eco-liberals (say, Ramachandra Guha) at one corner, Marxists (Kate Soper, David Harvey) at another, left Malthusians at a third, and socialist feminists (Mary Mellor) too, as well as autonomists and anarchists galore and motley tendencies that defy definition— such as Stephen Quilley's eco-libertarian-reactionary-communitarian [paganism](#).

The GND marquee stretches from Thomas Friedman (who coined 'Green New Deal') and Joe Biden through Marianne Williamson and Mariana Mazzucato all the way to [Thea Riofrancos](#) and [Tithi Bhattacharya](#) on the far left.

In each case, despite the canvas being multi-tendency and cavernous, there's a dominant political complexion. For the degrowthers: narodism. For the GND: social democracy.

By narodism I refer to the nineteenth-century peasant-oriented movement based in sections of the Russian intelligentsia which later, following years of dialogue with Marxists and the adoption of some of their ideas, re-emerged as a mass party, the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs). Russia's revolutionary Marxists learned much from the SRs and were at crucial junctures closer to them than to the social democrats—despite the Marx-influenced philosophy of the latter.

Inspirational

By social democracy I mean a cross-class political alliance rooted in organised labour. The support base is working-class but the programmes are designed and presented by middle-class strata (e.g. trade union officials) and elites (e.g. parliamentarians). It grows from labour struggles but its representatives advance policies and strategies that reflect their privileged social positions, and, [unless pushed forcefully from below](#), accommodate to the established power structures.

At one end of the GND spectrum, fractions of capital that scent profitable eco-opportunities look to programmes of state-led and state-subsidised infrastructure projects—an early example was the [‘Green Growth’ plan of Lee Myung-Bak](#) in [South Korea](#). For liberal elites, it represents a proposal to save capitalism from itself, for which a modicum of pressure from below may be required.

At the other end, for the far left, it represents an historic opportunity to wrest reforms from capitalism until the ensuing contradictions reveal spaces ‘beyond.’ The goal is a far-reaching and radical transformation of society. The method will be the building of a ‘movement of movements’ that knits workers’ demands for ‘green jobs’ and ‘pink jobs’ together with climate justice activism, and feminist, anti-racist, indigenous and pro-migrant campaigns.

In the zone between is social democracy. Organised labour and its allies demand state backing for green jobs programmes, as steps toward a ‘just transition.’ Social democrats are drawn both ways—excoriating capitalism one day, saluting the flag the next.

A case in point is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (pictured): the most inspirational and brilliant propagandist for a GND, a beacon for the US and global left, who however voted to gift [\\$1,480,000,000,000](#) to the Pentagon, the most powerful and murderous of US institutions and the [world’s biggest polluter](#).

Minerals from sunlight

In recent times we’ve seen a spiky back-and-forth between ‘eco-modernist’ supporters of a Green New Deal and advocates of degrowth (hereafter, ‘degrowthers’). Matt Huber, a Syracuse geographer, castigates degrowthers for advocating [a politics of less](#). In their focus on the prefix ‘de-’ and ‘reductions,’ they have “little capacity to speak to the needs of the vast majority of workers ravaged by neoliberal austerity.” Further, they recoil from “any hint of industrial technology (or what they pejoratively call a ‘techno-fix’).”

Leigh Phillips, an anti-environmentalist campaigner and contributor to *Spiked*, presses the same buttons *ad absurdum*. Degrowth and austerity “are mathematically and socially identical. [They are the same thing.](#)”

Against austerity-degrowth, he intones the mantra of modernity. “Energy is freedom! [Growth is freedom!](#)” A revival of “Prometheanism” is the order of the day, defined (idiosyncratically) as “the idea that there are no limits other than the laws of physics to how we can re-engineer ourselves and the world around us.”

Central to the programme is technology, regarded as if shorn of its socio-political integument. We should “weep hot tears of pride” at the technological miracles that capitalism has enabled, exemplified by the moonshot. Without reflection on its thoroughly militarist origins, purposes [and personnel](#), Phillips celebrates it as “the best that our species can do.” As for today, to counter climate change [a massive worldwide build out](#) of nuclear power is required.

Pollutive

In response, degrowthers diagnose Huber, Phillips and their ilk as suffering from a characteristically capitalist affliction: technological hubris. Lacking a comprehension of economic-ecological constraints (other than the laws of physics) they cannot take full measure of the crisis. Nor do they reflect seriously on the inadequacies and blowback potential of their preferred techno-fixes.

Phillips’ claim that nuclear power emits [no carbon dioxide](#) and is the safest of all energy sources is beyond risible. This conveniently forgets that mining and refining uranium ore and manufacturing reactor fuel require enormous energy inputs. And it is belied by the [many tens of thousands of deaths](#) due to [Chernobyl](#) alone, and the problem of waste.

Scientists are still stumped by the problem of warning the creatures approaching waste dumps a hundred thousand years from now. One biologist and semiotician team has developed the “[ray cat solution](#)”—cats genetically altered to glow when radiation is present. Why they predict that future earthlings will flee the luminous pussycats rather than, say, construct a religion around them is unclear.

As to renewable energy, it almost entirely [augments, rather than replaces](#), fossil fuels. Globally, wind and solar supply [only around 1.5 percent of total energy consumption](#). Wind and solar equipment require inputs of (largely non-renewable) energy, [concrete](#) and [metals](#) (including [rare earths](#)) that are highly [energy-intensive](#) to extract and recycle and often [pollutive](#) too.

Nano

As degrowther Mark Burton remarks, [you can't create minerals from sunlight](#). For these reasons, as well as 'rebound effects' and others too numerous to detail here, the *absolute* decoupling of global GDP growth and energy/materials throughput—[a prerequisite of 'green growth'](#)—is [effectively impossible](#).

What of the other charges?

Pace Huber, degrowthers do not “recoil” from technology or industry. Most of them recognise that phalanstery formation is no panacea, but one element within a comprehensive world-systemic revolution of relations of production and consumption and of society's relations to nature.

One systematic survey of degrowth literature [notes](#) that a common thread “acknowledges the virtues of technology,” and here the kinship to GND programmes is apparent. Many degrowthers fight for wind farms, with their mega-tonnes of reinforced concrete and steel towers, magnetic direct drive turbines, and nano-engineered polymers and composites.

War

Troy Vettese is by no means the only degrowther to advocate free public transport to entice people out of cars and planes, and 'passive' houses for all—both of which require colossal construction programmes.

Or listen to Burton's call for “a major transformation on the kind of scale of the Marshall Plan,” with its requirement of stupendous investments in “the decarbonisation of the power grid, the conversion of transport, heating and manufacture to electric power, and massive increases in energy efficiency.”

Jason Hickel, similarly, aligns himself with GNDs on at least one central point: public investment must urgently be targeted to churning out solar panels, wind turbines and batteries “at a historically unprecedented rate, reminiscent of the industrial retooling that enabled the allies to win the second world war.”

Revolutionary austerity?

On austerity, however, the picture is less clear. Certainly, Phillips' barbs miss their target, reliant as they are on crude misrepresentation. His antagonists are clear that degrowth is not identical to austerity programmes, “mathematically” or otherwise.

One is a strategy to restore rates of capital accumulation and defend the enrichment of the upper classes through slashing services and welfare spending on which workers and the poor depend. The other is a strategy that erodes the power of capital by relieving the rich of their fortunes and prioritising the welfare of the poor.

Huber's charges are hardly more convincing, and degrowther Giorgos Kallis, in a [brilliant rejoinder](#), makes short work of most of them. However, there is in Kallis' writings some ambiguity on austerity.

We know he does not subscribe to austerity politics. He is for debt forgiveness and the creation of “[debt-free public money](#),” and against the imposition of creditor power. Yet he takes as his guide the Italian Communist Party (PCI) leader Enrico Berlinguer's advocacy of “revolutionary austerity.”

This, in [Kallis' gloss](#), "is the sort of personal austerity that real revolutionaries of all times have practiced in their personal lives."

Excess

Defending revolutionary austerity, he adds, "does not make one accomplice to Thatcherite austerity. On the contrary, what is Thatcherite is the liberal assumption of a God-given right of each and everyone to mobilize all resources possible in their pursuit of their individual (or collective) goals.

According to this ingrained liberal view, we cannot tell people that we could perhaps live better with less, because it is people's god-given right to want more and more, as much as those richer have. What is more revolutionary instead than Gandhi's plea to 'live simply so that others may simply live'?"

Two elements of this deserve scrutiny. One is the Gandhian injunction. In affirming the centrality of individual consumption choices, Kallis is himself rehearsing an "ingrained liberal view": consumer demand is the motivating force that drives and shapes economic life. This is a myth. It obscures the power structures of capitalist society—and this occlusion is one reason why Gandhi received backing from India's industrial tycoons.

The other is Berlinguer's austerity agenda. It was not the austerity of today, i.e. the commitment of governments, typically citing the Smithian notion that thrift is the engine of growth, to slash spending on the services that working people require, plunging them into destitution while the well-heeled stroll on unperturbed.

Rather, his call for degrowth emphasised ending "excess" in the Global North to aid the South; it carried hints of Rousseau's position in the *querelle du luxe*, and of cultures of communist asceticism at times of struggle and war.

Universal frugality

In a 1977 pamphlet entitled 'Austerity, An Opportunity to Transform Italy,' Berlinguer assured the "old dominant groups" that the PCI would agree to "sacrifices by the workers" but only if the "social system as it stands, with its economic structures and basic ideas" were simultaneously transformed.

Yet his PCI was at the time committed to a 'historic compromise' with those same elites. The premise was that radical change inflames the dominant groups. Leftists should tamp down social struggles at the very moment when they carry their greatest potential, and instead construct alliances with the parties of army, business and church. In this context, Berlinguer's call for degrowth as a route to system change was incoherent.

The reluctance to challenge dominant elites is a critical failing in Berlinguer-style degrowth. An ethical critique of growth is vacuous if your party is concurrently stabilising the capitalist order, with its systemic drive to rapacious accumulation. It fails to connect with the experiences of those whom capitalist states, businesses and landlords have robbed: of their land, labour, social housing and so on.

Opposition to luxury and 'excess' in the abstract, and a prospectus of universal frugality, is conciliatory to those kleptocratic elites unless they're knitted to programmes to overturn the foundations of social injustice by eliminating absolute and relative poverty, and turning private productive and landed property over to the commons. ('Expropriation' in the old parlance.) These egalitarian goals are perfectly compatible with degrowth. There'd be a smaller overall materials/energy envelope, with differentiated contents.

For the rich, much *much* less, while for the billions who lack the basics: more good food, better housing, abundant clean water, efficient sanitation, excellent public transport, quality public amenities available freely to all. For the Global North: drastically reduced consumption of beef, SUVs, aviation, but better public transport, insulated homes, cleaner air, more self-governed time, less hierarchy.

Environmentalism of the poor

Mainstream advocates of GND and degrowth alike seek coalition with sections of the capitalist classes—big business for the GND, [SMEs for degrowthers](#).

But on the far left of each movement the perspective is of fanning the flames of popular movements to the point where they besiege and begin to overcome the institutions of corporate and state power.

The strategic perspective of GND leftists is to build capacity among workers' and other social movements to push for immediate reform programmes, with an orientation toward socialist goals in the longer run.

What of the degrowth *narodniki*? By and large, they will join campaigns for unionised 'green jobs,' but what 'just transition' programmes would they discuss with, say, the [Kentucky miners](#) who are [blocking coal trains](#) to demand back pay?

At first sight, that conversation may not seem promising. From the phalanstery window, workers' housing and jobs do not loom large. The degrowthers' strategy, laments [Stefania Barca](#), has not gained traction among "the impoverished and precarized working classes of the austerity era, nor does it seem capable of having a constructive dialogue with the labour movement in general."

Self-organisation

Yet there are three resources on the left of the degrowth movement that enable constructive engagement. One is the commitment to powerful unions, seen—rightly—as vital allies in the struggle for reductions in the working week and for improved public services and affordable housing.

The second is the commitment to the self-organisation of groups suffering poverty and oppression. This is a mainstay of authors in the degrowth canon. One such is Guha, notably his work on the [Chipko movement](#), which saw peasants in Uttarakhand 'hugging' trees' to prevent commercial logging.

Guha [broadens the lens](#) from India to other countries—Malaysia, Kenya, Brazil—to argue that environmentalism of peasants, pastoralists and indigenous peoples is entwined with agendas of social justice, of local rights to resources, to survival and [livelihood](#). Another is Joan Martinez-Alier.

His *The Environmentalism of the Poor* finds transformative potential in groups in the Global South, such as the Ogoni and the Ijaw of the Niger Delta, who defend themselves against extractivist corporations and compliant states, and in the process learn to link local grievances to international environmental politics, connecting with campaigning groups elsewhere to press for indigenous rights at the local scale as well as national and international reform.

How these commitments to defending peasant and pastoralist control over the immediate means of livelihood and the rural 'commons' can translate to urban settings, and beyond to questions of national and global infrastructure (including Amazon, Google, etc.), all on the basis of self-organisation, is a question that will face our *narodniki* if they upscale to SRs.

Refugees

The third is anti-capitalism, where capitalism is understood, [with input from feminist theory](#), as a system that loots and plunders across all socio-natural fronts. It degrades the environment, uproots communities and dispossesses people of their means of reproduction and subsistence, threatening livelihoods.

It requires continuous expansion, and irreversibly damages the climate. It rests on the exploitation of wage labour and on uncompensated care-work performed mostly by women. It [displaces costs in racialised ways](#) and enforces a racialised economic hierarchy of core and peripheral nations. It imperils the earth, but workers and the poor—foremost women and racialised groups—are first in the firing line, least responsible, and possessed of immense latent power.

From this diagnosis flows the aspiration to what degrowther [Bengi Akbulut and colleagues](#) call a "reproductive economy of *care*, understood not only as caring between humans but also between humans and the non-human environment."

It is an ethic that builds on the experiences, in daily life and struggle, of exploited and oppressed groups. Whether in the sphere of production or reproduction, struggles strengthen ethics of care and solidarity, and as they broaden, the compass of care/solidarity expands. Environmental crisis demands the extension of such an ethic to the natural world, to climate refugees, against militarism, and so forth.

Venality

[Degrowthers](#) therefore seek to build coalitions with “women, peasants, artisans, workers and indigenous people,” groups who “are typically engaged in struggles against the negative impacts of capitalist growth on their living conditions.”

As [Martinez-Alier](#) has discussed, opposition to such projects as commercial plantations, mineral extraction, and big dams, is “as much a defence of *livelihood* as an ‘environmental’ movement in the narrow sense of the term.”

Degrowthers, Barca observes, share with socialists the belief that a strong labour movement is capable of leading a concerted bid for system change, an ecological revolution, so long as a convergence can be achieved between red and green movements [“on the terrain of a politics of livelihood.”](#)

That requires a coalition of the labour movement and anti-racist, feminist, social justice and environmental justice movements in a [“movement of movements](#), or an alliance of the dispossessed.” The defence of ‘life’ against capital offers a lattice on which a radical, working-class environmentalism could grow, nourished by the aforementioned ethic of care, and anger at injustice: at the theft of surplus value, the dismantling of welfare, and the venality and recklessness with which those in power have handled this our planet.

Convergence at the left

The three principles just listed bear a distinct resemblance to those that guide socialist theorists of GND. I have in mind Alyssa Battistoni’s [vision](#) of a climate-stabilising socialism “oriented toward sustaining and improving human life as well as the lives of other species,” with an emphasis on green- and pink-collar labour such as “teaching, gardening, cooking, and nursing: work that makes people’s lives better without consuming vast amounts of resources, generating significant carbon emissions, or producing huge amounts of stuff.”

I’m thinking, too, of Tithi Bhattacharya’s reflections on [‘Three Ways a Green New Deal Can Promote Life Over Capital,’](#) with its call for “insurgent caring.” These share an understanding that the environment is a class question. The compulsive force that drives businesses to exploit workers drives them to plunder and despoil nature too. Ending the latter requires abolishing the former.

In this survey of the terrain, there is no ‘degrowth vs GND’ rivalry as such. Between the camp heartlands there clearly is. Growth boosterism and degrowth are incompatible, and the difference is often infused with morality and aesthetics—on one hand, a fetishism of technology, a belief that there exist no environmental limits and a dogma that ‘growth is good’; on the other, a self-righteous frugality and zeal for the hair shirt. But at the left corners, the tents are [so close](#) as to practically touch. The greater clashes will occur within each.

This Author

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