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# Degrowth ‘from below’? The role of urban social movements in a post-capitalist transition

Research Paper

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## Authors

**Dr Samuel Alexander** is a Research Fellow with the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute and a lecturer with the Office for Environmental Programs, University of Melbourne. He is the author of thirteen books, including *Degrowth in the Suburbs* (2019, co-authored with Brendan Gleeson), *Wild Democracy* (2017), *Prosperous Descent* (2015) and *Sufficiency Economy* (2015).

**Professor Brendan Gleeson** is the Director of the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, at the University of Melbourne. Brendan has made significant scholarly contributions in urban and social policy, environmental theory and policy. He is the author or editor of fourteen books, three of which have won national and international prizes, and numerous journal articles.

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## Reconciling urbanity with planetary limits

In recent years much has been written on the ‘why’ of degrowth (see D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015). The range of arguments and evidence are mounting in support of this emerging post-capitalist paradigm, in which overgrown economies are being urged to embrace some equitable process of planned contraction of their energy and resource demands in order to operate safely within planetary boundaries (Kallis 2017, Steffan et al 2015). As the evidential and theoretical case for degrowth firms up, we find ourselves at a turning point, where more attention must be given to the strategic question of ‘how’. We will not review the existing degrowth literatures in any depth (see Kallis et al 2018). Instead, our goal is to extend and deepen the understanding of degrowth by examining the concept and the movement from a perspective that has received less attention—namely, transition theory (see Buch-Hansen 2018).

While addressing questions of transition and transformation, our further point of departure is to look at degrowth through the lens of urban studies—and conversely, to look at urbanity through the lens of degrowth (Alexander and Gleeson 2019). The city itself can be seen as an organisation or rather a meta-organisation, with Harvey Molotch (1976) long ago describing the city as a ‘growth machine’. How to mobilise socially and politically to transform that organising machine is clearly a pressing issue of our time. Today it is commonly acknowledged that we live in an urban age, where more than half of humanity now lives in cities. But just as this realisation dawns, we also hear from concerned scholars about the Anthropocene (Hamilton 2017), that recent epoch in which humanity, for the first time, has become a force of geological significance. Surely, these occurrences—the

urban age and the onset of the Anthropocene—are connected (Taylor, O’Brien, and O’Keefe 2017).

Indeed, any reconciliation with Earth will need to involve a ‘Great Resettlement’ of our species, through which we, *homo urbanis*, endeavour to reconcile our urbanity with planetary limits (Gleeson 2014). Can the emerging degrowth literature shed light on this urban challenge? Can urban studies offer insights for the degrowth movement? Literature at the nexus of these issues is scarce (Lietaert 2010, Xue 2015, March 2016, Lehtinen 2018) and the question of an urban degrowth transition is sorely neglected. But one thing is clear: it will be in cities where most of humanity experiences, and responds to, the Anthropocene.

In this article we explore the role urban social movements might need to play as the organising forces of a degrowth transition in cities. Defined further in later sections, urban social movements are ‘urban-orientated mobilisations that influence structural social change’ (Castells 1983, p. 305). Put otherwise, they seek to ‘undermine social hierarchies which structure urban life and create, instead, a city on the basis of use values, autonomous local cultures and decentralised participatory democracy’ (Mayers 2006, p. 202). We use the term broadly to include social mobilisations that self-identify as a movement, as well as local eruptions of community engagement and significant cultural shifts made up of only loosely connected participants. The premise we seek to defend and build upon is that through ‘self-organisation of independent actors’ urban social movements raise ‘radical possibilities for living different urban lives in reconfigured urban economies’ (Bulkeley 2013, p. 11). We were motivated to explore



this mode of societal transformation due to our increasing pessimism that governments, especially in capitalist societies, would initiate a degrowth process from the ‘top down’. It was that pessimism that led us to develop, in the context of degrowth, a grassroots theory of change ‘from below’, which we will sketch out in this paper. We will do so in relation to urban social movements that are already in existence, while acknowledging that these movements of resistance and renewal are also typically small, on the fringes, and marginalised by the dominant logics of urban development.

We focus our attention on urban contexts in the most affluent and resource intensive nations around the world (including our own context of Australia), where the call for degrowth—or planned and equitable contraction of the biophysical economy—has the clearest application. This is not to deny the role urban social movements will need to play creating viable modes of urbanity in the poorest regions of the world too. It is only to acknowledge that due to deep differences in economic, social and political contexts, the issues, potentialities, and barriers will be sufficiently different to demand separate analysis. Our current focus is quite ambitious enough.

We begin by outlining the various ‘growth imperatives’ that shape capitalist economies, in order to justify our pessimism with respect to leadership on degrowth coming from governments. We proceed to summarise the critique of growth, which highlights the magnitude of the global ecological-humanitarian predicament. Upon those foundations we put forward a theory of change that we maintain is the most coherent framework for creating, by design rather than disaster, a post-growth (and thus post-capitalist) urbanity. We draw on the degrowth literature to frame our analysis and argue that, given the various growth imperatives constraining government action under globalised and increasingly urbanised capitalism today, the emergence

of a degrowth society will need to be driven into existence from the grassroots up, rather than from the top down. We maintain that urban social movements will have to be the organising force of this grassroots transformation, if it is to occur. We recognise, of course, that any societal transition this fundamental will involve multiple levers and trigger points, including state action, but in this paper we focus on the necessary and leading role urban social movements will need to play in driving such a transition.

After sketching this theory of change we conclude the analysis by outlining how early signs are emerging of what, tentatively, could be considered the birth of a ‘degrowth urbanity’. This review includes post-consumerist movements that are prefiguring degrowth cultures of consumption by embracing material sufficiency as a path to freedom, meaning, and reduced ecological burdens; it includes community-led urban resistance and renewal movements, as well as transgressive and creative forms of the sharing economy as a means of thriving even in a contracting biophysical economy; and it includes other social movements and strategies that are seeking to develop new (or renewed) informal urban economies ‘beyond the market’.

In highlighting the importance of urban social movements we do not, however, deny the need for structural change via state action. Human behaviour inevitably takes place within structures of constraint that often ‘lock’ people in to high-impact living (Sanne 2002), while locking many more out of economic security. This is a systemic problem that will ultimately require a systemic response. Nevertheless, our core thesis is that a post-growth or degrowth state will most likely be the outcome, not the driving force, of a just and sustainable post-capitalist society, with significant structural change occurring only *after* grassroots movements build new post-capitalist economies within the shell of capitalist economies. As David Harvey (2013, p. xvi) contends, reclaiming the city ‘cannot

occur without the creation of a vigorous anti-capitalist movement that focuses on the transformation of daily urban life as its goal'. Building on that insight, we will argue that there will never be a transformative politics or economics beyond growth until there is a broad culture of sufficiency and solidarity that demands it. This article seeks to unpack a theory of change based on that essential logic, although we make no pretence to have answered all the questions we raise.

## The growth imperatives of capitalism

To begin laying the foundations for our theory of change, it is necessary to outline why the political economy of growth has acquired its hegemony (Purdey 2010) and why hopes of an enlightened government or state leading a degrowth transition from the top down seem slim to non-existent (Alexander 2013). These foundational inquiries are important because understanding the extent of capitalism's 'growth imperative' has implications on political strategy for change. If it can be shown that capitalism requires growth for stability and that ongoing growth is unsustainable, then it follows that capitalism has an ecological time limit. Here the question of the urban age comes to the fore. The wasteful and disruptive 'hypertrophic urbanism' (Gleeson 2014) that capitalism has lately produced in many global urban regions must therefore also have a time limit (Banjeree 2008).

To speak only of capitalism in the singular is misleading, of course, given the diverse forms that capitalist political economy assumes globally (Gibson-Graham 2006). Each form is shaped by a unique but evolving range of institutions, cultures, market structures, and property rights. Global capitalism is an evolving phenomenon too (Hardt and Negri 2000, Fotopoulous 2016), given that its constituent parts (both nation-states and global institutions) are ever changing. But diverse though these capitalisms are, there is one feature that many critics argue is inherent to them all: the in-built structures that necessitate economic growth for systemic stability (Harvey 2011, Blauwhof 2012, Smith 2016). When a

growth-dependent economy does not grow, this poses an existential threat to the system. Therefore: 'Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!' (Marx 1976, p. 742).

Our starting premise, then, is that a 'degrowth capitalism' (to be distinguished from capitalism in recession) is a contradiction in terms (Foster 2010, Trainer 2012). Below we explore the logic of this observation by highlighting the various growth imperatives of capitalism. Note that several of these imperatives blur into each other, even as they represent distinct issues. We note also that some are specifically capitalist, while others, though features of capitalism today, are actually characteristic of complex societies more generally. We contend that even one of these structural issues would suffice to establish that capitalism is growth-dependent; together they show the imperative to grow is compelling.

### Microeconomic and macroeconomic growth imperatives

Within capitalist economies, corporate firms must seek to maximise profits and productivity or risk being destroyed by more ambitious and ruthless market competitors (Gordon and Rosenthal 2003, Binswanger 2009, Harvey 2008). While at times human greed plays a role in the pursuit of profit-maximisation, this first point is more fundamental: the nature and systemic logic of capitalist economies require profit-maximisation at the microeconomic level, which functions to give the capitalist macroeconomy a built-in structural tendency toward growth (Smith 2010, Blauwhof 2012).

While some theorists (Lawn 2011, Jackson and Victor 2015) have attempted to create models that show that capitalism, in theory, can be stable without growth, critics of such a position (Magdoff and Foster 2010) are right to note that this ‘is only conceivable if separated from the social relations of capital itself’. Or, as Frederik Blauwhof (2016, p. 254) puts it, a steady state economy is ‘possible, but not feasible within the social relations of capitalism’. Economists and political economists have argued that this is true within neoclassical models (Gordon and Rosenthal 2003) and post-Keynesian models (Binswanger 2009). David Harvey (2008, p. 24) argues that it is also true within the Marxist framework. Accordingly, from various theoretical perspectives (a variety that adds increased credibility to the shared thesis), we see that capitalism provides an existential incentive to maximise profits and productivity without limit. Thus, the macroeconomic structure of capitalism is organised in a way that requires the micro-economic organisations within capitalism to accord with its golden rule: expand capital.

### Debt as a growth imperative

Similarly, there is a related growth imperative created by debt-based monetary systems, especially but not exclusively under capitalism. Currently most money is loaned into existence by private banks as interest-bearing debt, and in order to pay back the debt plus the interest, this implies an expansion of the monetary supply (Trainer 2011). Banks only lend to people or institutions that they think will be able to pay back the debts incurred, and those most likely to make the most profit get given credit first. This lending system inherently gives capitalism a pro-growth structure since money—and the power it brings—is most readily available to the firms most likely to make the most profit. Again, intricate models have been produced that seek to show that interest-bearing debt does not necessitate growth (Jackson and Victor 2015). Without entering that theoretical debate, the

functional reality of debt-based systems is clear: given the trillions of dollars of debt that has been taken on across the globe in recent decades, capitalism (more than ever) requires growth for stability, for otherwise debts stop being repaid and the system collapses, which is what almost happened in 2008 and which remains a real, ongoing threat (Keen 2017). Again, at the macroeconomic level, then, we see that the same golden rule of capitalism applies: grow the economy or enter crisis.

### Power as a growth imperative

Furthermore, the powers-that-be—say, the largest corporations and governments that are doing financially well within the capitalist system—would not tolerate a deliberate transition to a post-growth or degrowth economy. At least since Marx there has been a line of critical theory that conceptualises the state as merely a tool for securing and advancing the interests of the richest agents or institutions in society (Marx and Engels 1848). In a market society, money is power; the powerful want to remain powerful; thus, the powerful want more money to secure and advance their interests. The logic is simple but compelling.

Governments in particular seek a growing economy, because that implies a larger tax base to draw from to implement their range of policies. There is an important geopolitical factor here: governments need growth to maintain or advance their balance of power in a military sense. But more broadly, given that a degrowth economy would directly undermine the economic interests (as conventionally measured by money) of the most powerful corporations and institutions in society, one should expect merciless and sustained resistance from these vested interests if a degrowth movement ever began gaining ascendancy. In short, the most powerful agents in today’s global economy want their profits to grow and those forces shape economies with that goal in mind.

### Globalisation as a growth imperative

Indeed, even if a government *wanted* to pursue a degrowth agenda, there are global and national economic forces at play which would obstruct such an agenda being rolled out. Call this the problem of ‘Empire’, a concept developed by post-Marxist, political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000). Not only are nation-states today constrained by numerous international trade agreements and powerful global institutions, but the free flow of capital around the globe has given new power to an imperium of transnational corporations that can now move their financial resources from country to country with unprecedented ease. If governments were to create unattractive financial conditions (eg by raising corporate taxes or minimum wages), corporations could threaten ‘capital flight’, and just knowing that capital flight is possible can insidiously constrain government action through fear, even in the absence of an explicit threat. The globalisation of capital therefore creates another structural growth imperative.

In summary, the possibility of a state led degrowth transition seem impossibly constrained by the structural imperatives of capitalism. The growth-dependent, heavily indebted market economies we know today would be unable to adjust to the types and speed of the foundational changes required to avert ecological crisis. This inevitably has an urban dimension too, with the city itself being described as a ‘growth machine’ by Harvey Molotch (1976), a perspective that has provoked an entire tradition of scholarship and analysis (see Cox 2017). Molotch (1976, p. 310) argued that ‘this growth imperative is the most important constraint upon available options for local initiative in social and economic reform’. In an age when capitalism has attained near complete hegemony, growth-orientated societies just do not know how to deliberately create a macroeconomy or urban

form that produces and consumes *less*—and yet, as we outline in the next section, that is precisely what seems to be necessary for ecological viability.

### Ecological overshoot and the limits of decoupling

Having shown that capitalism has various growth imperatives, we will now review the ‘limits to growth’ position in order to show that capitalism requires what it cannot have: limitless growth on a finite planet. This brief restatement of the critique of growth is necessary to respond to those who feel that ‘green growth’ under capitalism is sufficient to produce a sustainable and just economy.

The critique of growth can be concisely stated. There are now 7.7 billion people on Earth. Recent projections from the United Nations suggest we are heading for around 9.8 billion by mid-century and more than 11 billion by 2100. This increasingly urbanised global population, even if it stopped growing today, is placing tremendous burdens on planetary ecosystems. Needless to say, modes of production and consumption in the wealthiest regions of the world are by far the most environmentally impactful (Wiedmann et al 2015), although the emerging economies seem to be following (or being forced onto) the same high-impact, fossil-fuel dependent industrial path taken by the richest nations (Fotopoulos 2016).

By all range of indicators the global economy is now exceeding the ‘safe operating space’ of many planetary boundaries (Steffan et al 2015). The ecological footprint analysis indicates that humanity would need 1.7 planets if the existing global economy could be sustained over the long term (Global Footprint Network 2017). If the United States or Australian way of life were globalised to the world’s population, humanity would need four or five planets worth of biocapacity (Global Footprint Network 2017).

Despite the global economy being in this overgrown state of ecological overshoot, it is also known that billions of people on the planet are, by any humane standard, under-consuming (Hickel 2017a). If these people are to raise their living standards to some dignified level of material sufficiency, as they have every right to do, it is likely that this will place further burdens on already overburdened ecosystems (O'Neill et al 2018).

And yet, despite the fact humanity is already making grossly unsustainable demands on a finite biosphere, all nations on the planet—including or especially the richest nations—are seeking (or required) to grow their economies without apparent limit (Purdey 2010). It is all very well to point to the potential of technology, design, and efficiency improvements to produce 'green growth', but the fact is that as the world gets distracted by such theoretical possibilities, the time for transition is vanishing (Smith 2016). Absolute decoupling is either not occurring or the very isolated examples of success are grossly insufficient (Kallis 2017, Weidmann et al 2015). Efficiency without sufficiency is lost.

Perhaps the most egregious flaw of growth economics is the apparent failure to understand the exponential function and its ecological implications. Tim Jackson (2009) has shown that if the OECD nations grew their economies by a modest 2% over coming decades and by 2050 a global population of nine billion had achieved similar income per capita, the global economy would be 15 times larger than it is today. If, from that point, the global economy grew by 3% it would be 30 times larger than the present economy by 2073 and more than 60 times larger by the end of this century. It is obvious that ecological limits will not permit that scenario to eventuate—even an economy twice as large as today's economy would surely wreak havoc. The critical point is that the degree

of 'decoupling' required to make ongoing growth 'sustainable' is simply too great (Ward et al 2016, Trainer 2016, Kallis 2017).

The implications are clear but radical: if the global economy is to operate within the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet, this requires (among other things) the richest nations to initiate a degrowth process of planned economic contraction, on the path to a 'steady state' economy of stable biophysical throughput. Obviously, the poorest nations would also need to achieve some 'steady state' in time, but first their economic capacities must be developed in some form to ensure basic needs for all are met (Escobar 2015, O'Neill et al 2018). As stated in the introduction, this counter-hegemonic narrative of progress will require a Great Resettlement of cities, through which humanity attempts to reconcile its urbanity with planetary limits.

We do not argue that a voluntary transformation of overgrown urban economies is likely, only that, by force of reason and evidence, some such transition will be necessary if there is to be any ecological reconciliation with Earth. Indeed, we have already acknowledged the slim chances of degrowth being widely embraced by governments and civil societies. But this admission does not undermine the case for degrowth. If, in the face of compounding evidence, societies and commerce continue to pursue economic growth without limit, and thereby intensify the collision with ecological limits, then we argue that the degrowth values and practices of sufficiency, solidarity, and frugality, remain justified (even more justified!) as a means of building urban resilience in the face of forthcoming shocks. The only responsible course of action is to act appropriately in the face of the evidence, and in an urban age of gross ecological overshoot and global inequality, we contend that the imperative for degrowth is undeniable.



## Degrowth from below: Towards a grassroots theory of change

There is much governments could be doing to help produce more just and sustainable societies—and there is no shortage of literature providing advice (see Cosme et al 2017)—but the central point from the analysis above is that governments, especially under capitalism, have various growth imperatives built into their structures. This means in practice that governments—including the mechanisms of representative democracy—should not be relied on to be the prime drivers of any degrowth transition to a post-capitalist society.

In fact, it seems that an ecological blindness is an inherent feature of the very structure of contemporary representative democracy. Unable or unwilling to look beyond the short-term horizon of the next election, and constrained by the undemocratic but often hidden influence of money in policy formation, politicians are essentially prohibited from taking a geological or eco-centric view of things. Degrowth arguably lies in the ‘blind field’ (Lefebvre 2003[1970], p. 23) of representative democracy—an unthinkable necessity that cannot be discussed within the term of office.

It follows that attempting to take control of the state may not necessarily be the best way to initiate the transition to a just and sustainable degrowth economy, for even a socialist state may find itself locked into unsustainable growth just as capitalism is. Therefore, a post-growth state may only ever be the outcome, not the driving force, of a movement for degrowth.

This raises the key question of what social, political and economic forces or mechanisms might drive such a transition beyond growth. If conventional representative

democracy is unable to accommodate the degrowth imperative by virtue of politicians and dominant institutions being locked into the growth paradigm, then it follows, we argue, that the emergence of degrowth will have to depend on a post-capitalist politics of participatory democracy and grassroots activism (Gibson-Graham 2006). This means relocalising political power through participatory and collective action, rather than waiting for governments to solve problems that they are either unable or unwilling to solve. In an urban age, this may well depend on urban social movements creating, within the city boundaries, post-capitalist degrowth economies and cultures from the grassroots up. The remainder of this article unpacks this theory of change.

### Transforming the city without (at first) taking power

In pro-growth political contexts—and we think particularly of contemporary cities in the most affluent regions of the world (Molotch 1976)—it is at the household and community levels where people arguably have most freedom to influence their urban existence in a post-growth direction. Thus it is at this grassroots level where we invest hope for change; where we argue the sparks of transformation are going to have to ignite if a degrowth society is to emerge. People may not feel like they have much influence over the decisions of their members of parliament, or the decisions of big business or other global institutions, all of which are manifestly infected with growth fetishism. This is especially so in a neoliberal age, in which the dominant task of urban governance, according to Harvey (1989, p. 11), is ‘to lure highly mobile and flexible production, financial, and consumption flows into its space’. But within the structural constraints of

any society or city there nevertheless resides a realm of freedom through which individuals and communities can resist and oppose the existing order and make their influence felt (Holloway 2002, Trainer 2010, Holmgren 2018). Indeed, urban social movements have often arisen in reaction to neoliberal urbanism (Mayer 2006), and this conflict may be set to deepen.

It is in those cracks which permit a degree of urban autonomy and self-governance where we argue participants in a degrowth movement need to thrust the crowbar of oppositional activity in the hope of leveraging their influence. We are proposing that through a process of participatory democracy and grassroots action there might be a chance to ‘crack capitalism’, as political theorist John Holloway (2010) puts it. We say that there might just be a chance in the sense that it is the only hope. This is not to say that the household or community levels are necessarily the ideal spheres of urban transformation (a question we leave open); it is only to acknowledge that if governments will not embrace degrowth, then the household and community levels are the *only* remaining spheres of transformative potential. Let us remember that ‘economy’, according to Aristotle, meant the good management of the household, and for him the household was the foundation of the *polis*. In our age of apparent governmental paralysis, this Aristotelian perspective might again highlight the necessity of a political strategy that begins with the intentional transformation of urban daily life.

We feel this perspective could be easily misunderstood, so a word of clarification is in order. We are not suggesting that strong top-down governance of (urban) economies would not be desirable. On the contrary, it is perfectly clear to us that governments, local and national, could do many things to advance the causes of justice and sustainability, and elsewhere we have shared our thoughts on

policies for a post-growth economy (Alexander 2016). We acknowledge, furthermore, that mobilising for degrowth only at the grassroots (or micro-economic) level is problematic, since voluntarily reducing energy and resource consumption in a market society can function to reduce pressure on markets and hence induce price reductions. Those pricing dynamics can then lead to *increased* consumption by those actors in society who are not attempting to create a degrowth society and who happily exploit the access to cheaper commodities. This ‘wicked problem’ has led Blake Alcott (2008) to highlight the legitimate concern that frugality in some sectors of society might lead to a consumption ‘rebound effect’ elsewhere. Accordingly, in order to affect structural reduction in energy and resource use, there ultimately needs to be some mechanisms to limit aggregate use—and this needs cooperation by formal political and economic institutions.

Nevertheless, our position is that growth fetishism has such a strong hold on the branches of government that efforts directed toward producing strong top-down policy for a degrowth economy will essentially be ignored by policy makers—unable to make it through the filter of capitalist structures and ideology—thus those efforts for progressive top-down change could well be wasted. Marginal anti-capitalist movements like degrowth do not, of course, have a surplus of energy or resources to waste or misdirect, so if it is the case that the zebra of growth capitalism will not change its stripes, it arguably follows that people should not dedicate their efforts toward convincing it to do so, no matter how desirable that top-down change may be. Rather, people should dedicate their efforts toward areas with the greatest leverage—with the greatest potential to effect positive change—and we have come to suspect that, with respect to degrowth, the areas that have the greatest leverage lie amongst the grassroots of social movements and culture, not

parliament or the courts—at least at this early stage in the transformation (Alexander 2013).

The socio-cultural domain may have special disruptive potential due to the fact that other spheres of transformation can be understood as tools or means, whereas the socio-cultural sphere can be understood to be the source of goals or ends. In much the same way as the tool of ‘fire’ can have a positive or negative impact on our lives, depending on how it is used and how much of it there is, the tools of technology, business, and politics can advance or inhibit the transition to a degrowth society, depending on the social values and desires that shape their implementation and development. For these reasons, the socio-cultural sphere can be considered fundamental, in the sense that it provides the ends towards which available means are directed. Put otherwise, a revolutionary consciousness must precede the revolution.

This is not meant to downplay the undeniable importance of technological, economic, and political innovations on the path to a new, ecologically viable and socially just way of life. A coordinated, multi-faceted approach is both necessary and desirable. But insofar as technology, business, and politics reflect the culture in which they are situated, it would

seem that disruptive innovation in the socio-cultural sphere may need to be the prime mover, so to speak, which would then enable or ignite further disruptive innovations in other spheres of life (Solnit 2016).

This suggests that we must carefully consider not only what social conditions would best facilitate the urban realisation of a degrowth economy, but also what role social or cultural movements might have to play in producing those conditions. For even if notions of degrowth were to gain widespread acceptance within a culture, it seems highly unlikely that a degrowth economy would emerge unless people had some idea of what needed to be done at the household and community levels to bring about such an economy. This highlights the importance of practical and experimental degrowth initiatives as prefigurative social imaginaries (see Wright 2010). In other words, it is not enough merely to offer a critique of existing *structures* of growth capitalism; it is equally important to explore the question of *how one ought to live* in opposition to those structures. If governments will not lead this process, it arguably follows that social movements might have to change the world without (at first) taking state power (Holloway, 2010).

## Agents of change: The multitude for degrowth?

Who will be (or are) the change agents in the urban social movements for degrowth? The position we are expounding gives rise to an immediate theoretical tension, given that in radical political thought the traditional locus of revolutionary potential has been in the working class. But this class has in many ways subscribed to the ideology of growth, in the sense that the proletarian struggle since industrialisation has been for a greater, more equitable share of a growing economy pie, especially higher wages—and quite understandably so. Capitalism tends to concentrate wealth in grossly unjust ways, as economist Thomas Piketty (2014) has famously established in recent years with reference to vast historical data. This historical struggle for distributive equity has been a just and necessary struggle.

The demand for higher wages, however, can render the working class complicit in the ecological drive for ongoing economic growth that has no viable future in an age already marked by the transgression of planetary boundaries. Thus a socialist revolution that does not transcend the ideology of growth is no revolution at all, since an overgrown growth economy whose spoils are more fairly distributed is still unsustainable. It would advance the causes of social justice, at the expense of ecological viability, which would soon enough undermine the perceived advances in social justice. Marx always saw a need for the proletarian consciousness to develop before any revolution could transpire, but in an age of ecological limits it seems that the revolutionary consciousness may need to evolve in ways that transcend the growth paradigm.

Furthermore, the traditional goal of the proletariat has been to take control of the means of production in order to be in control of their

own working lives. That is a coherent goal as far as it goes. But as Andre Gorz (1982, p. 67) pointed out long ago, the goal should not be to take control *over* work, merely, but to ‘free oneself *from* work by rejecting its nature, content, necessity and modalities’. To reject work, Gorz continues, ‘is also to reject the traditional strategy and organisational forms of the working class movement. It is no longer a question of winning power as a worker, but of winning the power no longer to function as a worker’ (ibid). After all, if the proletariat

take[s] over the machinery of production deployed by capital, they will succeed only in producing the very same type of domination and, in their turn, become a functional bourgeoisie. A class cannot overthrow another class merely by taking its place within the system of domination (Gorz 1982, p. 64).

It follows that in an age of increasingly severe ecological limits, traditional theories of change must be reconsidered, both in terms of *who* the change agents will be, and *what* outcomes should be pursued or demanded (Albert 2004, Gibson-Graham 2006). The working class struggle must be grounded in ecological context and revise its demands and strategies accordingly, as eco-Marxists and eco-socialists are beginning to do (Sarkar 1999, Baer 2017). But rather than appealing for a ‘top down’ transition led by the state, we are arguing that, due to the various growth imperatives that constrain government policy today, a degrowth economy must emerge ‘from below’.

In our view, the change agents in this neo-proletarian grassroots urban transformation will obviously need to include workers, who we argue should seek to increase their participation in non-monetary, informal and



sharing economies as times of crisis deepen (Gibson-Graham et al 2013, Nelson 2018). We give more content to this broad post-capitalist strategy in the next section and review its emerging manifestations. Change agents will also need to include members of the more affluent middle classes, who, in growing numbers, will need to withdraw from the vapidness of consumer culture, embrace radical forms of voluntary simplicity or downshifting, and act in solidarity with others who are building new, fairer and more localised urban economies within the shell of global capitalist system in decay. Thus we do not posit a homogenous proletariat but recognise a fractured ‘multitude’ (Hardt and Negri 2004) or ‘neoproletariat’ that may act in heterogeneous ways for a post-capitalist future. To again draw on the words of Gorz (1982, p. 75):

The neoproletariat is no more than a vague area made up of constantly changing individuals whose main aim is not

to seize power in order to build a new world, but to regain power over their own lives by disengaging from the market rationality of productivism.

It should be clear that this is not in any way to dismiss the material groundings of systemic change; it is only to invite political strategists to be open to reimagining modes of transformation for the present era of increasingly severe ecological limits. Rather than working toward degrowth via either parliamentary politics or a revolutionary seizure of the state, we have been arguing that the best prospects of initiating a degrowth transition lie in the grassroots of urban social movements. Having sketched a defence of that position, we are now in position to briefly review examples of urban social movements that we argue, represent pioneering movements in an emerging (though still highly marginal) degrowth urbanity.

## The practice of post-capitalist politics and economics

Without social movements, no challenge will emerge from civil society able to shake the institutions of the state through which norms are enforced, values preached, and property preserved. (Castells 1983)

In the introduction we noted David Harvey’s comment that reclaiming the city ‘cannot occur without the creation of a vigorous anti-capitalist movement that focuses on the transformation of daily urban life as its goal’ (Harvey 2013, p. xvi). While a singular or homogenous anti-capitalist movement does not exist, the following brief review indicates that a heterogeneous body of loosely connected urban social movements is emerging that seems to be prefiguring aspects of a degrowth society. Obviously, the vocabulary of degrowth does not need to be used for a movement to contribute to degrowth’s emergence.

### The Voluntary Simplicity Movement

The lived experience of degrowth necessarily implies a deep reevaluation of consumer affluence and an embrace of lifestyles of radical material sufficiency. This exploration of post-consumerist ways of living is currently being undertaken within the Voluntary Simplicity Movement (Alexander 2009), with participants seeking to live more on less (Kasser 2017). This is an example of social movement resisting capitalist cultures of hyper-consumption and beginning to establish the counter-cultural conditions needed for a degrowth economy to emerge structurally. We anticipate that some hard-nosed political economists will be quick to dismiss this as a naive ‘lifestyle movement’ of little consequence, but in our view that critique masks its own naivety, since

the macroeconomic or structural changes that certainly are needed for degrowth will never arrive until there is material culture of sufficiency that demands them. As Taylor, O'Brien, and O'Keefe (2017, p. 796) argue: 'modern mass consumption developed in nineteenth century cities as a bottom-up process of acquisitive behaviour [and] ... to reverse the now uber-acquisitiveness will also be a bottom-up process'.

Based on the largest empirical examination of this movement, it has been estimated that as many as 200 million people are exploring 'simpler ways' of living in the so-called developed nations (Alexander and Ussher 2012), even if it must be acknowledged that this will involve a wide spectrum of practices, from modest attempts to reduce consumption to more radical expressions of downshifting. Challenging the popular conception of 'simple living' as being a rural lifestyle, the same study suggested that approximately 80 per cent of voluntary simplifiers are actually based in urban centres. Furthermore, the results showed that 68 per cent of voluntary simplifiers have come to conceive of themselves as being part of a simple living movement. This is a significant finding, given that historically the Voluntary Simplicity Movement has tended to be apolitical or escapist (Grigsby 2004). Much social movement theory suggests that the emergence of group consciousness is an important and necessary phase in the maturation of a social movement into a more potent social and political force (see McCann 2006).

The political and economic significance of the Voluntary Simplicity Movement is most apparent in how it can carve out *more time for people to create the new economy*. Building a new economy from the grassroots up will take time, and currently most households are 'time poor', locked into the work-and-spend cycle (Coote and Franklin 2013). By rethinking consumption levels, embracing frugality, and

exchanging superfluous stuff for more free time, voluntary simplicity provides a pathway that can enable grassroots activism, while also being directly in line with the sufficiency-oriented values of degrowth. Indeed, degrowth could be defined as the politics (and macroeconomics) of voluntary simplicity. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Voluntary Simplicity Movement must expand, radicalise and organise if it is ever to become a transformative political force. We are talking here of 'a shift to change the everyday behaviours of billions of people, and, just as important, to change the "development" aspirations of other billions of people to realise such behaviour' (Taylor, O'Brien, and O'Keefe 2017, p. 796). Like all the examples discussed in this section, it is likely that online networking will need to play a key role mobilising and organising urban social movements in the 21st century.

### Transition initiatives, permaculture, and localisation movements

The 'Transition Towns' Movement (now generally referred to as 'Transition Initiatives') is a recent social experiment that emerged little over a decade ago—first in the UK and now in more than forty countries around the world. It remains bubbling under the surface in many towns and cities (Hopkins 2008, Hopkins 2011). Whereas the more-established Ecovillage Movement has generally sought (or been required) to escape the urban context to establish experiments in alternative living, the Transition Movement, motivated by similar concerns, tends to accept the challenge of transforming city life from *within* the urban boundary. A 600-page practical urban manual has just been published by co-ordinator of the permaculture concept, David Holmgren (2018), who calls on people to 'retrofit the suburbs' for the energy descent future. Broad areas for action include increased localisation of food production; reduced energy demand and shift to renewable; home-based produc-

tion and sharing of surpluses and skills; and generally an attempt to build alternative economies of sufficiency ‘beyond the market’.

The fundamental aims of Transition Initiatives are to respond to the overlapping challenges of climate change, peak oil, social isolation, and economic instability by decarbonising and relocalising the economy through a community-led model of change based on permaculture design principles. This urban movement has much overlap with the grassroots politics of degrowth outlined above, as well as broader localisation (de Young and Princen 2012) and permaculture movements (Holmgren 2002).

Rather than waiting for governments to lead, urban communities in the Transition Movement are embracing the ‘power of just doing stuff’, as it is expressed by the movement’s most prominent spokesperson, Rob Hopkins (2013). In doing so, the movement runs counter to the dominant narrative of globalisation, representative democracy, and economic growth, and instead offers a positive, participatory, highly localised but more humble vision of a post-carbon and post-growth future, as well as an evolving roadmap for getting there through grassroots activism. In the words of post-growth economist, Tim Jackson, this international grassroots movement is ‘the most vital social experiment of our time’ (quoted in Hopkins 2011). Although still small in the greater scheme of things, and easily accommodated by capitalism at the current scale, we contend that something resembling an upscaled and radicalised Transition Movement may be necessary to the emergence of an urban degrowth economy from below.

### **Reactive urban mobilisations: Localised resistance to neoliberal urbanism**

While the Transition Movement is generally focussed on building the new economy, it is worth noting that there are also examples

in history and today of urban communities mobilising in a more reactive way to the city as a ‘growth machine’ (Molotch 1976), opposing neoliberal urbanism rather than building an alternative. In our context of Australia, the ‘Save Our Suburbs’ coalition is such an example, which is focussed on resisting the destructive renewal of urban consolidation and over-development (Lewis 1999). This movement seeks to mobilise communities with the aim of establishing planning and design policies that maintain or improve neighbourhood amenity; are environmentally sensitive and sustainable; and are genuinely democratic and consultative in nature. The network is often demonised by planners and progressives who wish to push for market based compaction. There is also a risk that the movement reflects a class of privileged actors who, far from being motivated by hopes of contributing to the common good, merely seek to maintain the clean and spacious affluence of their own often expensive and thus exclusive suburban contexts.

Nevertheless, we see in this urban social movement (and others like it) the seeds of something more progressive—at least potentially. The problem with current modes of urban development—especially poorly designed in-fill apartments on suburban subdivisions—is that the outcome often functions to inhibit or render impossible the very modes of urban sufficiency that are implicit in the vision for degrowth. Until urban communities mobilise in the face of capital and reclaim the right to shape their own urban futures, cities are likely to continue being shaped and reshaped by developers who are driven by profit-maximisation (Harvey, 1989), not the desire to see the urban landscapes transform in ecologically viable and socially convivial ways.

### The sharing economy: Access without ownership

The fast-emerging ‘sharing economy’ is another primarily urban phenomenon and signifies one of the theoretical buzzwords of recent years (Frenken 2017). The density of populations in urban centres, coupled with internet access, provide fertile grounds for sharing economies to flourish, and it is heartening to see this movement expanding in cities around the world (Nelson 2018). By sharing more between households—facilitated by the internet or by traditional community engagement—less energy and resource intensive production needs to occur to meet society’s needs. Even in a contracting economy (whether contraction is by design or by crisis), households can still secure access to the tools and other things they need, provided a culture of sharing emerges. This is the revolutionary reinterpretation of ‘efficiency’ implicit in the degrowth paradigm: produce less; share more. Beyond goods and services, theorists are beginning to explore the potential of sharing land and housing as a promising means of overcoming some of the access barriers to this fundamental need (Nelson 2018). In what has become a movement slogan, the sharing economy is about ‘access without ownership’, suggesting that a revision of property relations is underway.

As always, caution must be shown, given that the sharing economy is a broad umbrella, which can include forms that are easily co-opted by conventional economic practices and lose their transgressive force (Frenken 2017). Air BnB has few environmental credentials if it merely makes long distance travel more affordable; access to expensive handbags through sharing schemes is not progressive if it merely entrenches consumer culture; and so forth. In contrast, the online organisation ‘Streetbank’ is one of the most authentic expressions of sharing, where people create accounts and they list what

they would like to borrow from neighbours and what they are prepared to share, without money ever changing hands. It is clear that in a degrowth economy, non-monetary sharing of this latter kind provides a key strategy for adapting to and even flourishing in conditions of economic contraction. ‘Wealth’ is created by sharing, without needing extra (and even reducing) resource or energy intensive production (Bauwens and Ramos 2018).

### Home-based production and the informal ‘gift’ economy

An urban degrowth movement might also involve turning the household (once again) into a place of production, not merely consumption. On this point, some inspiration can be found in the past. Patrick Mullins and Chris Kynaston (2000) assess what they call the ‘urban peasant thesis’, and their review of the evidence shows that up until the middle of the twentieth century, Australian urban households had operated a highly developed subsistence-based, domestic economy. This included the production of foodstuffs in suburban backyards, but extended to the manufacture of other household goods, including clothes, furniture and even owner-built housing. Thus the dwelling and the yard were seen primarily in utilitarian, rather than aesthetic, terms. This ‘urban peasantry’ declined however in the Post-War Boom, as the rise of mass consumer capitalism enabled households to purchase goods previously produced within the household. We contend that any degrowth or post-capitalist transition may well see the reemergence of an ‘urban peasantry’ in this sense, albeit one shaped by different times and concerns. If the automation of the workforce leaves more people unemployed, it may be that people have the time (and incentives) to invest in home-based production as a means of self-provision. This is another example of post-capitalist economics, insofar as things are produced for use, rather than exchange.



An urban degrowth economy also implies an incremental re-emergence of the gift economy—to some extent, at least (Eisenstein 2011). If material living standards are forever expected to rise, long working hours required to support that ongoing material advance will generally leave people ‘time poor’, making it difficult for people to gift their skills and resources in the spirit of community and neighbourly support. This debate over working hours and precarious employment might also be a potential bridge between the degrowth movement and trade unions. By consuming less and carving out more time for practices outside the formal economy, the practice of voluntary simplicity can also enliven the informal ‘gift’ economy. In similar ways to the sharing economy, this can ensure society’s needs are met even in a contracting (formal) economy.

### **The multitude of (mostly small) examples: Toward a degrowth urbanity**

Above we have merely highlighted a few key examples in the slow emergence of what we are tentatively calling a degrowth urbanity. Although our purpose herein is not to provide a comprehensive empirical review of existing movements, other examples deserving of note and further attention are the rise of ‘DIY’ or ‘fix it’ repair workshops and ‘bike kitchens’ (Bradley 2016); the growing tide of climate activism and divestment campaigns; the exploration of local currencies and crypto-currencies; progressive unions; as well as culture jammers and oppositional artists who are exposing the violence of current institutions and telling new narratives of progress and prosperity. Although most of those subcultures and counter-practices do not use the vocabulary of degrowth, each of them can be seen to be working on an aspect of societal change that is consonant with visions of degrowth. Accordingly, we agree with Taylor, O’Brien, and O’Keefe (2017, p. 798) when they state that ‘at this juncture of capitalism, there is a

need to embrace a myriad of radical groups ... rather than a monolithic single national party to provide opposition to capital’.

Nevertheless, we are cautious not to exaggerate what remains a notable but marginal confluence of urban social movements for deep change. We are not so delusional as to think the world is on the brink of a degrowth revolution. The movements for change noted above could easily fail, unable to thrive in the inhospitable context of neoliberal capitalism. But in our view, there are reasons to think that a degrowth urbanity is emerging, even if we admit that it is very much in its infancy. As Australian musicians, Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody, sing: ‘From little things big things grow’. The fact that the degrowth movement *must grow* to achieve its aims is an irony not lost on the present authors.

The triggers which will ignite that expansion is a key question we have not addressed in any detail. Our article began with the pessimistic acknowledgement that we saw little hope in governments leading the change for degrowth. We close this article by pointing to a different and even deeper pessimism: our expectation that any urban social movements for degrowth are unlikely to scale up significantly until (deeper) global crises shake people awake. Crisis can be a mobilising force (Solnit 2016), and significant societal change may well require the instability that crisis creates. The urban agriculture practices that spontaneously emerged in Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union (greatly reducing Cuba’s oil supply) provides an example of how to turn crisis into opportunity (Friedrichs 2013), even as one must be careful not to gloss over the hardship Cuba’s ‘special period’ entailed. There are also a range of hopeful responses to the economic crises in Greece, which offer insight into ways of dealing positively with challenging and turbulent times (see Kalogeraki 2018).

But we must not be seen to be romanticising or desiring crisis like some dreamy-eyed optimists. When the crisis of capitalism deepens—perhaps in the form of a new financial crisis or further ecological breakdown—the task will be to ensure that such destabilised conditions are used to advance progressive humanitarian and ecological ends rather than exploited to further entrench the austerity politics of neoliberalism. We recognise, of course, that the latter remains a real possibility, as did the arch-capitalist Milton Friedman (2002, p. xiv) who expressed the point in these terms:

Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

Our vision is for a confluence of networked urban social movements to build a new degrowth economy within the shell of a decaying capitalist economy—not because this grassroots approach is necessarily the best way to create a degrowth economy, but because there does not seem to be any mechanism for its emergence other than social movements building it from below, especially in times of crisis. Our argument has been that only *after* this new economy has significantly scaled up will there be any prospect of a significant politicisation of degrowth from the top down, that is, through the mechanisms of government, law, and regulation. In short, a politics of degrowth depends on a culture of collective sufficiency, solidarity, and self-provision that prefigures a degrowth economy and over time demands its reflection in societal structures and institutions. To begin with a ‘top down’ approach would be to put the cart before the horse.

## Conclusion

The theory of change sketched in this article has maintained that there will be no realisation of degrowth visions of the economy and society until there is a confluence of engaged and active urban social movements that demand degrowth (or something very like it) and are prepared to drive new worlds into existence from below. It is quite clear to us, as noted, that in cities of the Global North no single observed movement for degrowth is currently capable of inducing the revolutionary changes that degrowth would require. Nevertheless, there are a variety of existing and emerging urban social actions and coalitions that, while far from representing an organised movement for degrowth, do prefigure aspects of what a transition politics could look like if radicalised and organised over coming years and decades. Furthermore, we are cautiously confident that as the dominant growth economies continue to collide with ecological limits in coming years, the case for degrowth will only become clearer to more and more people, which could act as a mobilising force. Given the new urban preponderance, which will only continue to strengthen through this century, cities will be the foregrounds of human response to global ecological crisis. If, as urbanists insist, they are machines for human ambition, they must clearly be rewired, literally *reorganised*, for a post-growth world.

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Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute  
Glyn Davis Building, Masson Rd  
The University of Melbourne  
Parkville VIC 3010, Australia

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