

From pandemic toward care-full degrowth

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Abstract

This article advances the case for caring and commoning as engines for getting through the COVID-19 pandemic and for moving toward more equitable and sustainable futures. Building on two processes of collaborative intellectual work among degrowth activists, it diagnoses relations between growth and crisis; identifies policies to move through and beyond pandemic, including care income; and raises challenges of financing just transitions and dealing with conflicts to come.

Key Words

Degrowth, feminism, pandemic, care, care income

Introduction

COVID-19 has not brought about the degrowth strived for by social movements around the world. Yes, the health crisis has provoked sharp declines in natural resources used and waste generated, giving welcome respite to ecosystems. And yes, the lives of *some* people have slowed down, as ambitious schedules give way to more time for reflection and relationships. But no, unevenly-suffered trauma, impoverishment, and death are not features of degrowth; on the contrary, these are precisely the kind of phenomena that planned degrowth aims to avoid.

Goals of degrowth are to reduce harm to humans and other nature by voluntarily slowing down global use of material and energy, and to reorient values, institutions, and worldviews around equitable wellbeing. Diverse actors and groups are advancing degrowth via everyday practices, communal initiatives, and scholarly theory (e.g., Gezon and Paulson 2017; Kallis 2018, Treu and Schmelzer 2020). This article shares processes and proposals of two overlapping groups whose messages converge around caring and commoning as engines for moving in more equitable and sustainable directions.

First is the Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA), an inclusive network of activists and scholars launched in 2016 at the 5th International Degrowth Conference in Budapest. During March and April 2020, around 40 participants of this network, quarantined in locations ranging from Chile to Finland, joined in a series of virtual conversations that mixed strategizing for political change with mutual encouragement for facing immediate challenges. After circulating ideas and drafts, the group produced two public messages: “Feminist degrowth reflections on [COVID-19 and the Politics of Social Reproduction](#)” and “Collaborative Feminist Degrowth: [Pandemic as an Opening for a Care-Full Radical Transformation](#).”

The latter begins:

The crisis we face as a global community must be understood not only as a public health crisis, or as an economic crisis of the capitalist mode of production, but also, fundamentally, as a crisis of the reproduction of life. In this sense, it is a crisis of care: the work of caring for humans, non-humans, and the shared biosphere. The pandemic is a historical rupture . . . we take this opportunity to reflect on how we can, from our diverse positions, face this moment, organize, and collectively imagine radical alternative modes of living: those with more time for community, relationship building, and care for each other as well as the non-human world.

Second is a team of four activist scholars whose collaborations in teaching, conferences, and writing have led to the soon-to-be-published book [*The Case for Degrowth*](#). Joining many others in making the case that perpetual growth is harmful and doomed, this publication goes further by providing encouraging examples and reachable proposals for healthier ways forward in daily practices and values, communal organizing, government policies, and political mobilization. Like the FaDA network, these co-authors not only encourage readers to prioritize care and common effort, but practice it themselves, as communicated in the book's acknowledgements:

Writing this book is an act of care. Care for family, friends, and fellow citizens striving to contribute and find meaning in the face of historic challenges. Care for people and places around the world struggling to survive the burdens and damages of growth. And care for each other, as collaborators and co-authors. As in any act of care, our efforts to produce this book ran up against the limits and vulnerabilities of our individual positions – class, gender, disciplinary, cultural, and other.

The present article shares ideas and paraphrases passages from each of these documents, with the goal of fostering dialogue with other social movements and communities who have surged to address issues unleashed by the pandemic. In doing so, it responds to challenges laid out by Laurence Cox (2020) of bringing together enough campaigns of mutual aid, solidarity economy, and related efforts to launch a social movement project able to forge more just and healthy worlds.

Diagnosis: growth and pandemic

The relentless pursuit of growth has long been attacked as a root of social ills and ecological disequilibrium. Today, it is tempting to portray the COVID-19 pandemic as tangible proof of limits to growth, a messianic reckoning for our unsustainable ways. But such a claim would be naïve; epidemics have spread in the past and will in the future. It is clear, however, that the speed and scope of this contagion have been driven by accelerated global economies, while the growing ease with which viruses jump from animals to humans is conditioned by the expansion of industrial

agriculture, ranching, and other encroachment of humans on habitats, as well as the commodification of wildlife, all integral to current growth economies.

The slow and inadequate responses of leaders like Bolsonaro, Johnson, and Trump, as well as urges to restart economies before the pandemic has waned, can likewise be understood in the context of ongoing pushes to sustain growth. Several decades of budget cuts to public health and social infrastructures, enacted as public funds were redirected to subsidize expansion of private industry, have eroded the capacities of many governments to respond.

A dangerous dimension of these pushes for growth has been the rejection of scientific evidence and advice. Fossil-fueled growth has been defended by efforts of climate change deniers to undermine faith in science. Shunning findings that threaten economic expansion, some governments have cut funding for pandemic research units and epidemic control teams, as well as studies on mitigation and adaptation to climate change. Even as COVID-19 spread, some leaders refused to respond to scientific findings and protocols (such as distancing, testing, and protective equipment) until pushed to do so by courageous protests of health workers, civil society, and other actors.

Pathways toward more equitable and sustainable societies

We would like to see societies become slower by design, not disaster. However, it looks likely that transition away from growth will be largely unplanned and messy, in conditions not of our own choosing. Conditions like the ones we are living through now. So, finding ourselves amid global disaster, we join other social movements in asking: How can we seize opportunities to build values, social arrangements, and policies that make pandemic situations more livable and just? That help our societies to emerge more humane and more sustainable post-crisis? That slow down the rush toward future disasters?

Certainly, transformative responses will require synergy among diverse perspectives and movements. Our most immediate case for including degrowth in this allied front is that its fundamental practice—modest living based in cooperation, sharing, and caring—is desirable in and of itself. Even with no victory in sight. End goals of degrowth—dignified work, equitable relationships, solidary communities, respect for natural environments, conviviality—are also the means through which people can exercise and embody the lifestyles, institutions, and politics of degrowth worlds to come.

Basic principles of care and solidarity have been illuminated by this pandemic. Many scientific, political, and moral authorities are communicating the message that caring for people's health and wellbeing should come before profit. A resurgence of the care ethic that we imagine at the heart of degrowth societies is evident in the willingness of people to stay home to protect community health, and in the spirit of duty and sacrifice among care and health workers, among others. This can be nurtured and mobilized.

As the pandemic plays out differently in different parts of the world, and among different social groups, degrowth feminisms call for heightened attention to inequalities and vulnerabilities. While some shelter at home, others must choose between jobs requiring exposure to the coronavirus and unemployment without adequate safety nets. While some find comfort at home, others deal with conflict, crowding, and violence, or the lack of any home. Today, these injustices coexist in fertile tension with awareness that, unless whole populations are protected, not even the wealthiest are fully safe from contagion.

In this crisis, like others before, people have mobilized longstanding alliances and forged new ones, such as groups of doctors, engineers, and hackers collaborating to develop open-source designs to 3-D print components for ventilators. Describing a resurgence of mutual aid movements as people collaborate in delivering prescriptions and groceries, helping others to manage welfare benefits, telephoning isolated community members, Benjamin Duke (2020) sees their confluence as fertile ground for the emergence of movements and alliances unthinkable before the pandemic.

The proliferation of collaborative caring endeavors are all the more commendable given the contagious nature of the virus. After the pandemic is over, and the difficult journey of reconstruction begins, this resurgent dynamism will be vital for establishing more enduring commons for care and provisioning.

Policies through and beyond pandemic

Positive impulses among individuals and grassroots networks are necessary but not sufficient for sustained change. Principles of caring and inclusive solidarity can also guide the establishment of policies and institutions that guarantee safety and healthcare, protect the environment, and provide economic safety nets. Policy packages advocated in *The Case for Degrowth* will be even more relevant post pandemic: Green New Deals, work-sharing and reduced working hours, universal public services, support of community economies, and basic care incomes discussed below.

Partly in response to pressure from activists and movements, governments across the political spectrum are already considering and selectively adopting some radical proposals. In Europe and North America, public and private employers have reduced working hours and implemented work-sharing; different forms of basic income are being debated; financial measures have been instituted to subsidize workers during quarantine and after businesses close; an international campaign for care income has been launched; governments have engaged the productive apparatus to secure vital supplies and services; and moratoriums are being considered or imposed on rent, mortgage, and debt payments.

There is growing understanding that vast government spending will be required. From a degrowth perspective, this should not be conceived as charity, or emergency aid to get things back to normal, but instead as fuel for concerted transitions to healthier socio-ecologies. Wealthier nations have more than enough resources to cover public health and basic needs during crises, and can weather

declines in non-essential parts of the economy by reallocating work and resources to essential ones. Yet, because current economic systems are organized around constant circulation, any decline in market activity threatens systemic collapse, provoking generalized unemployment and impoverishment. It doesn't have to be this way. To be more resilient to future crises—pandemic, climatic, financial, or political—we can (re)build systems in which market production can be scaled back without sacrificing livelihoods or lives.

Key to building such systems is the reorganization of public finance, starting with reallocation of subsidies away from fossil fuel, mining, automobile, and related industries and toward care and provisioning. We can stop taxing what sustains societies (people's work), and instead tax what destroys societies (pollution and inequality). Fees and strategic taxes levied on toxic waste and greenhouse gas emissions, water and air pollution, or resource extraction, as well as extreme incomes and wealth, can raise revenue while encouraging healthier arrangements.

Degrowth entails curbing resource-intensive and ecologically-damaging aspects of current economies. Feminists fight to reorient societies around the sustenance of human and other life. And societies in pandemic deal with demobilizing activities not immediately essential for sustaining life. Today, all coincide in facing the fundamental challenge of managing political economies without growth during and after COVID-19. How can we decommission aspects of capitalist economies that have been contributing to ecologic and social damage, while securing the provisioning of basic goods and services for all, and finding positive relations and meanings in life?

Care income

While respect for planetary boundaries demands that many aspects of the current global economy degrow, feminists argue that some critical features need to flourish, namely infrastructures of care. That requires investment in policies that support the regeneration of human and other life: the common organization of care; revaluing home as a site of production and reproduction; regeneration of healthy environments; and provisioning economies grounded in solidarity across different strengths and vulnerabilities. One mechanism through which political economies (with or without growth) can support and (re)value social reproduction is care income.

This pandemic has raised the pitch of calls for Universal Basic Income (UBI) by actors ranging from Pope Francis to the Spanish Parliament and US venture capitalist Andrew Yang. Defined as a modest sum paid monthly to each resident to secure conditions of life, the UBI has been advocated for over a century in conjunction with wide-ranging visions and purposes. Degrowth aligns with those proposals that seek to assure material conditions that can liberate individuals from exploitative employment, support transformation away from environmentally-damaging regimes, and move beyond choices of jobs versus environment toward politics that address viable livelihoods as inseparable from sustainable ecosystems.

Feminist advocates of degrowth propose a Care Income that builds on and differs from other UBI proposals by foregrounding social recognition of unpaid and gendered care work that we all perform to sustain the life and wellbeing of households and communities. Advocates are developing and debating various ways of operationalizing care income; they all seek to foster equity and solidarity by investment of common wealth in people's capacities to take care of ourselves, our kin, and others, as well as our environments ([D'Alisa 2020](#)). In one example of social movement advocacy, the [Global Women's Strike \(GWS\) and Women of Color GWS](#), urges governments to implement care income to recognize the indispensable role of (re)productive work for life and survival.

Conflict and mobilization

Bitter struggles will surely arise over which paths to pursue through and after this pandemic. Powerful actors will push to reconstitute status quo arrangements, and arrange to shift costs to others. There is real danger that abilities to ally in resistance will be undermined by politics of fear, intensified surveillance and control, xenophobia and blame, as well as isolation that constrains common efforts and political organizing.

Directing change toward more equitable and resilient societies that have gentler impacts on humans and natural environments will require alliances across social movements. Differently positioned actors will need to raise voices, organize, vote, strike, protest non-violently, and mobilize in other ways.

We are encouraged by instances in which common senses, practices, and politics of degrowth and feminisms are already being mobilized as people collaborate to provision and live differently, recuperating old and generating new modes of (re)production and social organization. We also recognize that the journey through and beyond COVID-19 will not be straightforward, but contradictory, with setbacks, counter-reforms, repressions, readjustments, and unexpected turns.

Conclusion

Leaders around the world are now focusing on saving the economy; many have already moved to bail out and re-launch profit-making industries, while media reinforce false antagonisms between economy and public health, between jobs and environment. What will it take to shift priorities toward saving human and ecological resources? What practices will help to interconnect culturally and geographically dispersed movements in support of just transitions, such as the [UN's Global Green New Deal](#), or [Pope Francis' proposal for global universal basic wage?](#)

Actors and groups advancing degrowth and feminisms have developed some nourishing alliances around the world, but have struggled to find traction in dominant party politics. Now, amid such tangible evidence of vulnerabilities, damages, and injustices, some of us—perhaps even political leaders—may be willing to question the wisdom of producing and consuming more and more, just to

keep the system going. The time is ripe for us to refocus on what really matters: not GDP, but the health and wellbeing of our people and our planet.

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Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA) is a dynamic and inclusive network that works to make feminist thought and practice an integral part of degrowth. You can subscribe by sending an email to fada-subscribe@lists.riseup.net. Also, you can visit our FaDA project space on degrowth.info, follow us on twitter, or write to the coordination group at fada-feminismsanddegrowth@riseup.net.

Coming in September 2020

[The Case for Degrowth](#), Polity Press. In this compelling book, Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D'Alisa and Federico Demaria make the case for degrowth - living well with less, by living differently, prioritizing wellbeing, equity and sustainability. Drawing on emerging initiatives and enduring traditions around the world, they advance a radical degrowth vision and outline policies to shape work and care, income and investment that avoid exploitative and unsustainable practices. Degrowth, they argue, can be achieved through transformative strategies that allow societies to slow down by design, not disaster.

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