

Toolkit to build resilience and sustainability without growth

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BOOK REVIEW - DOSSIER

Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis. Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era. New York and London: Routledge, 2014. 220 p. ISBN: 978-1-138-00076-6.

Edited by three researchers at the Institute of Environmental Science & Technology (ICTA), Autonomous University of Barcelona, this volume brings together 56 contributing authors, most of them based in Europe, with exceptions discussed below. Contributors include creative young researchers and practitioners as well as globally recognized scholars like Joshua Farley, Tim Jackson, Serge Latouche, Joan Martinez-Alier, Juliet Schor, and Erik Swyngedouw. The collection introduces the central lines of thought and courses of action associated with degrowth, via 51 short chapters; each defines a key concept or movement, connects it with core issues, and identifies relevant readings. The book has recently been translated to Portuguese and will be published by Editorial Tomo (Porto Alegre) in November 2016.

Amid a search for paths toward more sustainable and equitable socio-ecologies, the term “degrowth” was launched into late 20th century politics and social movements. The provocative idea has instigated debate in political parties and national elections. It activated anti-globalization and occupy movements, was embraced by Via Campesina and by People’s Summits on Climate Change, and it was exercised in local initiatives around the world. Following decades of publications and debates centered mainly in Europe, degrowth has also erupted in wider scholarly conversations, headlining over a hundred journal articles and dozens of books. Actors involved in these diverse initiatives on every continent have come together in five world conferences.

Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era is the first English language book to present this burgeoning field in a comprehensive manner. Its goal is to contribute to voluntary degrowth, defined as an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions (SCHNEIDER; MARTINEZ-ALIER; KALLIS, 2010:51). To that end the book describes concrete projects and actions, advances new modes of science, and makes a call to repoliticize public debates about development and wellbeing. Some of the projects described are back-to-the-landers, basic and maximum income, community currencies, co-operatives, debt audit, digital commons, job guarantee, local currencies, time banks, unions, urban gardening and work sharing. Ideas for forging new political cultures include anti-utilitarianism, autonomy, care, commons, conviviality, dematerialization, environmental justice and steady-state economics.

Current crises, ranging from debt to climate change, jeopardize the sustainability of socio-ecological systems, testing the limits of resilience for many people and places. On the positive side, these crises can stimulate adaptive cycles by destabilizing dominant socio-economic relations and cultural narratives and creating openings for constructing practices, politics and relationships that will better support resilience in the face of future challenges. Taking advantage of this moment of crisis, the book questions myths that portray constantly expanding production and consumption as compatible with the health of the planet and as good for the wellbeing of all its residents. It also presents a new conceptual vocabulary useful for rethinking these myths.

Material growth refers to the expansion of the matter and energy transformed each day by societal metabolism. Calculated globally, that quantity has expanded exponentially during the past few centuries. In thermodynamic terms, material growth accelerates the rate of anthropogenic entropy, resulting in an array of unwanted outcomes. Global scientists agree that curbing material growth would mitigate global warming, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, diminishing fresh water, and other processes that jeopardize the sustainability of communities and territories.

Economic growth is more contentious. Records compiled throughout modern history show that the rise of national GDPs has brought with it the expansion of ecological footprints. However, future relations between these trajectories are hotly debated; contributors to this volume criticize mainstream political efforts that continue to push economic growth while striving to “decouple” it from natural resource extraction and pollution.

Scientists, politicians, and development professionals use indicators of economic growth as proxies for all kinds of social goods, reinforcing the empirically unjustified assumption that a rising GDP automatically produces healthier, happier and wiser citizens. The question of whether economic growth is good or bad for societies is complicated by the highly unequal distribution of the burdens and benefits of such growth. Degrowth advocates propose replacing a focus on growth with policies and programs oriented directly toward chosen outcomes valued by each population: health, happiness, longevity, food sovereignty, literacy, numeracy, natural beauty, diversity, resilience, food sovereignty, sexual satisfaction, spiritual life, intellectual richness, or others.

One point on which proponents and critics of growth agree is that, in the context of current growth-based societies, the simple halting of economic growth leads to barbaric outcomes. What is needed, argue contributors led by Serge Latouche, is not just a quantitative decrease in production and consumption, but something much more radical: a cultural revolution that re-establishes values, livelihoods, relationships and politics on a new foundation.

Resilience studies contribute to that revolution by building capacity to learn and adapt to changing conditions and external shocks. The differently positioned groups discussed in the dossier published in this issue of *Sustentabilidade em Debate* face different challenges in sustaining ecological, economic and social aspects of their unique livelihoods. This book provides wider horizons for each group in its search for visions and for sociocultural and technical elements — old and new — that move beyond the growth imperative to build healthier and more sustainable socio-ecologies.

The articles contained in this dossier connect especially well with the chapters on commodity frontiers and environmentalism of the poor. As growing global economies push extractive enterprises into new territories, people in Brazil and elsewhere are increasingly taking action against economic development that seeks to incorporate their labor and natural resources into the raw end of value chains.

Authors of the chapters in the book under review combine concepts, methods and information developed in various disciplines, including the newer fields of sustainability science, resilience studies, ecological economics, political ecology, and environmental justice. A vanguard contribution of the new vocabulary are concepts and analytic methods that connect economics with biophysical sciences: bio-economics, commodification of nature, entropy, energy, societal metabolism, steady-state economies, Jevon’s paradox, neo-Malthusians, and dematerialization. Efforts to question growth have pushed these authors beyond the bounds of mainstream natural and social sciences. Some think about their work in terms of “post-normal science,” initially conceptualized as a problem-solving strategy appropriate



“when facts are uncertain, values are in dispute, stakes are high, and decision urgent” (FUNTOWICZ; RAVETZ, 1994: 1882). Many engage with non-governmental organizations, or with political, religious and social activism.

For the purposes of supporting work toward resilience and sustainability worldwide, this book has three related weaknesses. It promotes degrowth as a purposeful project that can and should be exercised by actors in high-GDP, high-consuming contexts. Its first limitation is lack of attention to actors and groups facing degrowth as an unintended occurrence, not necessarily welcome by participants, some of them already living in conditions of very low consumption.

A second limitation is the scope of contributors, most of whom are based in Europe, with only a handful in the US or Australia, and few voices from Africa, Asia or Latin America. A merit of the book is the inclusion of a few renowned thinkers from the global South: Eduardo Gudynas writing about *Buen Vivir* in South America, Mogobe Ramose writing about Ubuntu in South Africa, and Arturo Escobar with critiques of development. This move opened the window to broader dialogue manifest in recent publications (ESCOBAR, 2015; KOTHARI; DEMARIA; ACOSTA, 2014).

The third weakness is the presence — in some, but not most, chapters — of normalizing rhetoric that communicates a sort of degrowth orthodoxy, as in “degrowthers are against,” “degrowthers dislike,” and “degrowth claims.” Language that implies the existence of a consolidated scientific paradigm and united political platform contradicts the big banner of degrowth unfurled by the editors, who call for readers to apply the new vocabulary with creativity and diversity. The challenge is to maintain intellectual rigor while also celebrating the ability of degrowth to energize and connect remarkably heterodox thinking and surprisingly heterogeneous action.

This book can motivate and empower readers of *Sustentabilidade em Debate* to see socio-environmental challenges and possibilities in new and transformative ways. It contributes to the vitality of degrowth thinking and action by providing tools for people around the world to move the conversation forward. Their responses will be manifest in constructive adaptations to difficult situations in which ecological and/or economic resources are diminishing, and also by voluntary alternatives not dominated by growth.

Degrowth - voluntary or involuntary - is not going away. As researchers and residents work to build resilience, I strongly recommend that they engage this toolkit of concepts and methods for intervening in current political debates and for realizing concrete proposals on various scales— local, national and global. As the editors write, the book “(...) will be an indispensable source of information and inspiration for all those who not only believe that another world is possible, but work and struggle to construct it right now.”

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