



the case for

DEGROWTH

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The Case for Degrowth

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Preface

As this book goes to press, in April 2020, the World Health Organization has declared a global pandemic of COVID-19. We write these lines quarantined in our homes in Barcelona and Florida. We are not prophets, so we cannot predict how health and economic crises will have unfolded by the time you read this book. One thing we do know is that the case for degrowth will remain as relevant as ever.

We make a case for attributing current ecological disequilibrium and a range of social ills to the relentless pursuit of growth. It would be naive to claim that this pandemic is proof of limits to growth, a messianic reckoning for our unsustainable ways. Epidemics happened in the past and will happen in the future. Yet the speed and scope of this contagion are clearly driven by interconnectivities of accelerated global economies, exemplified in its spread via airplane and ship routes. The growing ease with which viruses jump from animals to humans is conditioned by expansion of corporate agricultural systems, encroachment of humans on habitats, and the commodification of wildlife, all integral to current growth economies.

The failure of some leaders to respond quickly and to protect their populations, as well as urges to restart economies before the pandemic is over, can likewise be understood in the context of ongoing pushes to sustain growth analyzed in this book. One dangerous dimension of these pushes is rejection of scientific evidence and advice. In recent decades, climate change deniers have undermined faith in science among a portion of the public in efforts to defend fossil-fueled growth. Not welcoming scientific findings that threaten growth economies, some

governments have cut funding for pandemic research units and epidemic control teams, as well as studies on mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

Several decades of budget cuts to public health and to social and civil security infrastructures, enacted in the name of economic growth, have eroded capacities of many states to respond to this crisis. The pandemic has laid bare the fragility of existing economic systems. Wealthy nations have more than enough resources to cover public health and basic needs during a crisis, and could weather declines in non-essential parts of the economy by reallocating work and resources to essential ones. Yet the way 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 need to build systems capable of scaling back production in ways that do not cause loss of livelihood or life.

Some of you might protest, "Isn't the coronavirus crisis revealing the misery of degrowth?" We invite you to first read this book. What is happening during the pandemic is *not* degrowth. The goal of degrowth is to purposefully slow things down in order to minimize harm to humans and earth systems. The current situation is terrible, not because carbon emissions are declining, which is good, but because many lives are lost; it is terrible not because GDPs are going down, to which we are indifferent, but because there are no processes in place to protect livelihoods when growth falters. For us, caring and community solidarity are vital principles of degrowth societies, and engines for moving in more equitable and sustainable directions.

We would like to see societies become slower by design, not disaster. This pandemic exemplifies the types of growth-induced disasters we diagnose in this book. The economic policies and social arrangements we propose offer ways to make such situations more livable and just, to emerge stronger and better post-crisis, and to reorient practices and politics that are setting the scene for future disasters.

The end of growth will not necessarily involve a smooth transition. It may very well be unplanned, unwilled, and messy, in conditions not of our own choosing. Conditions like the ones we are living through now. History often evolves with punctuations; our analysis shows how periods of paralysis can reach a tipping point, when unexpected events open new possibilities and violently close others. The COVID-19 pandemic is such an event. Suddenly, things take radical new directions, and the unthinkable becomes thinkable, for better or for worse. Severe economic depression led to Roosevelt's New Deal, and also to Hitler's Third Reich. What are the possibilities and dangers now?

Amid this pandemic, many scientific, political, and moral authorities are communicating the message that caring for people's health and wellbeing should come before profit, and that is great. A resurgence of the care ethic that we advocate is evident in the willingness of younger people to stay home to protect their elders, and in the spirit of duty and sacrifice among care and health workers. Of course, many stay home also because they fear the virus and worry about themselves, or to avoid police fines. And many care workers go to work because they must earn a living. But, as we argue, acting collectively against such crises requires combinations of sacrifice and solidarity, self and collective interest, government interventions and popular consensus about the right thing to do.

Deep inequalities are coming into play in new ways. While some have the luxury of sheltering at home, others must choose between unemployment without an adequate safety net and exposure to the coronavirus in jobs involving care work and provisioning. As the pandemic plays out differently in different parts of the world, those who are in more vulnerable identities and positions are likely to suffer more than others. These injustices coexist with an 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 and self-organized where businesses and governments have failed to provide for their needs – from mutual aid groups delivering food and medicines for elders, to groups of doctors, engineers, and hackers collaborating to 3-D print components for oxygen ventilators, to students babysitting the children of doctors and nurses. The proliferation of caring and commoning endeavors, which form the bedrock of the degrowth societies we envision, are all the more commendable given the contagious nature of the virus. After the pandemic is over, and the difficult path of economic reconstruction starts, this resurgent dynamism of commoning and care will be vital.

Positive impulses among individuals and grassroots networks are necessary but not sufficient for sustained change. We need states to secure safety and healthcare, protect the environment, and provide economic safety nets. The policies we advocate in this book were necessary before the pandemic, and are vital during and after: a Green New Deal and public investment program, work-sharing, a basic care income, universal public services, and support of community economies. So is the reorganization of public finance through measures including carbon fees and taxes on wealth, high incomes, natural resource use, and pollution. Whereas our book focuses on demobilizing

resource-intensive and ecologically damaging aspects of current economies, pandemic responses deal with demobilizing those aspects not immediately essential for sustaining life. We coincide in facing the fundamental challenge of managing political economies without growth during and after the pandemic: how to demobilize parts of the capitalist economy while securing the provisioning of basic goods and services, experimenting with resource-light ways of enjoying ourselves, and finding positive meanings in life.

Radical proposals are already being considered and selectively adopted across the political spectrum as they provide concrete solutions amid the pandemic. Companies and governments have reduced working hours and implemented work-sharing; different forms of basic income are being debated; financial measures have been instituted to subsidize workers in the quarantine period 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.

Our book suggests ways we can reconstruct economies with the goal of mitigating crises that loom on the horizon, including a wide array of threats associated with climate change. This goal will not be met by subsidizing fossil fuel companies, airlines, cruise ships, and tourism megabusinesses. Instead, states need to finance Green New Deals and rebuild their health and care infrastructures, creating jobs in a just transition to economies that are less environmentally damaging. As oil prices fall, fossil fuels should be taxed heavily, raising funds to support green and social investments, and to provide tax breaks and dividends