

Degrowth: the realistic alternative for Labour

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Degrowth poses a fundamental challenge to a Labour Party that has yet to decide how far it wishes to transcend – and not merely reform – a growth-oriented, capitalist political economy.

The British Labour Party has seen a resurgence of radicalism since the 2007-8 financial crash. With the collapse of the authority of neoliberalism, a space has opened for alternative ideologies, theories and policies. This space has hitherto been dominated by a post-Keynesian orthodoxy, one that seeks to manage capitalism better, in the interests of ‘the many’. This is sometimes accompanied by an acknowledgement that ecological and climate crisis threaten to render any economic and social system unviable. This article introduces the ideas of the ‘degrowth movement’: an alliance of scholars and activists who link social, economic and ecological justice through a critique of the dominant economic and social models of advanced capitalism. Degrowth poses a fundamental challenge to a Labour Party that has yet to decide how far it wishes to transcend, and not merely reform, a growth-oriented, capitalist political economy.

An alternative socialist tradition

According to Raymond Williams, there are two versions of the socialist tradition. In the long evolution of the British labour and socialist movement, there are many examples of those who did not simply struggle against labour exploitation and for a bigger slice of the cake produced by the workers, but who also resisted the reduction of life to commodity relations. For the Diggers and related groups, these

ideas and struggles were present from the earliest stirrings of capitalism. They were present in Chartism, with its Land Plan and mutual institutions, the Socialist League, associated with Morris's critique of industrial society, or the Clarion Club, with its cycle excursions linking socialism and the countryside and its range of alternative cultural institutions. This tradition was never entirely eclipsed. Referring to this legacy, Williams argued that: 'in Britain, identifiably, there is a precarious but persistent rural-intellectual radicalism: genuinely and actively hostile to industrialism and capitalism; attached to country ways and feelings, the literature and the lore'.¹

As he later reflected, Williams was here criticising the dominant tendency of the Labour Party at that time, for whom socialism was no more than 'a successful industrial capitalism without the capitalists'.² Pre-capitalist values, resisting both commodification and destruction of relations with nature, were present in the modern emancipatory project. Yet the dominant force was what Williams called 'productivism'. This was the tendency to assume that the central problem of modern society was poverty, which would yield to production, and more production.

The resilience of 'productivism' is demonstrated every time Labour demands investment-led, inclusive and even 'green' growth. Yet we are faced with a world capitalist system that is pressing up against the finite limits of the natural and physical world. This system ensures the continued reproduction of dispossession and impoverishment. Fetishising growth is not only unrealistic, but deeply unjust: by and large, it is people in the Global South who will suffer most from the environmental devastation associated with continued economic growth. Continued growth on a finite planet is a recipe for international conflict and competition. As Paul Mason demonstrates in a recent article in which he calls for a slowing-down of Chinese growth, the UK Labour Party's dominant productivism is ultimately dependent on a form of national-welfarism.³

The degrowth movement

Degrowth is the name given to a relatively new movement that has emerged, largely in continental Europe, over the last ten years or so. However, it has deeper roots, drawing on the field of ecological socialist thinkers such as André Gorz and Cornelius Castoriadis, and ecofeminists like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva. There have now been six biennial international degrowth conferences, the last being in August 2018 in Malmö, Sweden. The next, in 2020, will be in Manchester. The conferences, like the movement, combine scholarship with activism, acting as interventions in local debates: the Leipzig conference, for

example, was associated with a climate camp action, occupying and temporarily shutting down a lignite mine, while the Malmö conference ended with a demonstration and debate with Swedish politicians in the city centre.

Degrowth has two linked emphases. On the one hand it seeks to orient politics away from the 'imaginary of growth', appealing to more fundamental human values. It draws attention to the laziness of thinking whereby 'growth' becomes an aggregate and imprecise substitute for detailed examination of the aims of society and its economy.

On the other hand it is concerned with a managed contraction of the material scale of the economy. Degrowth stands against the illusions of 'green growth', which assumes that the flows of materials through the economy from extraction, via production and consumption to pollution, can be 'decoupled' from GDP growth. Degrowth scholars point to the extensive research evidence that no such decoupling has been shown to occur. In the case of greenhouse gas emissions, the most positive evidence of decoupling has only been found for a handful of de-industrialising countries, and nowhere at the level required to meet those countries' emission reduction responsibilities. When other material flows are considered, there is no evidence of any decoupling from economic growth.⁴

Moreover, the idea that there will be technological fixes for capitalism's endless expansion can be refuted on the basis that there can only be partial substitutability of resource inputs; that the substitutes themselves have footprints on both the resource reserves and the ecological sinks at each end of the chains of extraction-production-distribution-consumption-pollution; and that, unless the demand for more and more is stemmed, technological substitution and efficiency can only offer a temporary respite.⁵

Crucially, de-growth does not imply a return to a romanticised, rural past. Here, too, Williams is a helpful reference point. A genuine eco-socialism will rest on recovering the centrality of relationships between people and nature; something that has been obscured by the urban-industrial trajectory of both capitalism and mainstream social democracy. Rather than bolting concern about 'the environment' onto an underlying commitment to industrial growth and urbanisation, eco-socialism recognises nature as a vital and constituting aspect of human existence.

Labour opens to degrowth?

Noting the heterogeneity of the degrowth movement and of allied formations, it is perhaps helpful to think more in terms of a 'degrowth family' of approaches,

which all reject the expansion of the economy as a legitimate policy goal. Can Labour be a part of that family? A number of developments, in both Labour and in the political ecosystem to which it belongs, seem to indicate some resurgence in the alternative socialist tradition discussed above – which, as I argue, is very close to the modern degrowth philosophy.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Limits to Growth was launched in 2016. Its membership includes leading Labour MPs, among them five front-benchers. It is serviced and supported by CUSP, the Research Institute headed by Tim Jackson, a prominent ecological economist and author of the *Prosperity Without Growth* report (originally commissioned by Ed Miliband). While membership of the group does not indicate support for a degrowth agenda, it does mean that these leading figures are regularly exposed to the evidence base for the impossibility of continued material growth of the economy and to discussions of alternatives.

A major speech by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) marked perhaps the first time that a leading Labour politician has acknowledged that the pursuit of economic growth is itself problematic, pointing to the limits to growth and the existential risk of climate change. He also pointed to the social and economic costs of growth:

We need to rethink the very purpose of economics ... Growth for the sake of growth alone no longer works ... We have seen an improvement in GDP but a decay in the quality of life.⁶

The Institute of Public Policy Research is a body that has traditionally been very much a mainstream, social-democratic, policy house, close to Labour but historically associated with the ‘modernisation’ programme of Kinnock and Blair. So it was a welcome development when the December 2017 issue of its journal, *Progressive Review*, on the Anthropocene, carried some very degrowth-friendly pieces, including one by ecological Marxist Jason Moore and another by Kate Raworth, the well-known theorist of ‘doughnut economics’. The introductory editorial, by IPPR staff Carys Roberts, Matthew Lawrence and Laurie Laybourn-Langton, seemed to fully embrace the themes of radical political ecology and ecological economics, the two main theoretical bases for degrowth.⁷

There are no out-and-out degrowth thinkers in the ranks of Labour’s academic and policy advisors, but there are a number who have at least some familiarity with the debates over the limits to growth and the shortcomings of growth as a panacea. Typically, they will criticise GDP as a measure and question the pursuit of its expansion, while reverting to arguments of the form that boosting public

expenditure (albeit on clean technology and social welfare) is good for GDP. For example, in the same week that they signed an open letter calling for the European Commission to seriously consider a post-growth future, economists Ann Pettifor and Steve Keen both called for measures to ‘stimulate the economy’ in a radio discussion on the anniversary of the financial crash.⁸

Local government leaders – including Labour ones – often repeat the mantra of economic growth, typically in the context of seeking inward investment. However, there are also some interesting innovators. These are not necessarily degrowth activists, but the mantra of growth is typically absent from their pronouncements and strategy statements. Re-localising economies and de-linking them from energy-dependent supply chains is an approach common to de-growth advocates and proponents of ‘community wealth-building’. Labour councils such as Enfield and Preston are focusing on strategies to strengthen the local circuits of distribution and redistribution, emphasising co-operation, localism and the use of local wealth and financial flows to fund needed economic and social developments. Further examples include Oldham’s ‘co-operative council’ model, the ‘Wigan Deal’, and Salford’s initiatives on housing and the Living Wage. Building on these ideas, the Labour Party has established a Community Wealth Building unit to further develop the approach.⁹

Possibilities and challenges

Degrowth and socialism are not the same thing by any means. There are socialists who believe that non-capitalist economic growth would not be harmful. There are those in the degrowth movement who are not socialists. But in this period of inter-regnum, where the ruling ideology of market solutions is being rejected, there is an opening up to new ideas. Given its myriad roots in both radical political thought and robust scientific analysis, degrowth is well placed to make a critical contribution. However, all these ‘straws in the wind’ do not amount to a resolved change of direction. Overall, Labour policy development still relies, at best, on a contradictory ‘green growth’ logic, present even in the positive developments just enumerated.

The above analysis might suggest that Labour is in a kind of temporary unfrozen state where unorthodox, even iconoclastic, ideas can be voiced and taken seriously. But that will not last: Labour’s ideology will inevitably stabilise and harden as and when it moves into government. Productivism represents the path of least resistance, at least in the short term. Degrowth will only enter the party mainstream if there is a fundamental change of mindset.

What makes it difficult for Labour people to accept the thesis of limits to growth? Answering that might give us clues about how best to present degrowth thinking in Labour circles. The sources of opposition and counter-arguments to degrowth appear to be the following:

- Growth will supposedly deliver much needed paid jobs (the unwaged functions of social reproduction are sidelined).
- Growth will lift people out of poverty and deprivation.
- Problems of growth can be resolved by investing in smart technology.
- Growth in the form of ‘sustainable development’ is seen as consistent with environmental protection.
- The green movement is seen by many in Labour as a middle-class one that does not represent the interests of the working class.
- Nature is seen as separate: secondary to human life, society and economy.
- In a global world we have to compete economically to survive.

Degrowth thinkers have devoted many pages to debunking these ideas, and to working up alternative policy frameworks that are consistent with both the limits to growth and with the aims of social and economic justice. The challenge is how to make those positive degrowth ideas become hegemonic in Labour circles. This can be done in several ways, starting from an understanding of the mental and emotional investment that has been made in the growth idea and practising a kind of intellectual and emotional ju-jitsu: turning what is seen as positive in the growth narrative against it. For example, we know that investment in technical innovation tends to destroy jobs. We know that as capital accumulates (i.e. as growth takes place), divisions are exacerbated. And while it may be true that local economies are exposed to global capital’s game, that means that globalisation has to be fought through a relative re-localisation of economies. (That does not mean, however, that we can’t also be internationalists.)

It is essential to seek and offer demonstrations that degrowth principles do deliver social benefits, for example when local financial flows are captured and redirected to local benefit, or control is regained over dimensions of the local economy, as demonstrated by the radical municipalities of the Fearless Cities movement. This does not mean seeking perfect degrowth in an imperfect world, but rather seeking innovations that are compatible with degrowth and indicate the ways in which degrowth ideas could be implemented at scale. Furthermore, the solid body of research that is building a credible economics of degrowth needs promoting as a contribution to socialist policy formulation.

Conclusion

Key parts of the socialist tradition are associated with a rebellion against the domination of life by ‘economic’ – or capitalist – rationality. This rationality cloaks the domination of people by property: the many by the few. With that domination over people goes the domination of nature: its pell-mell exploitation without regard to its regeneration and to the future. This, in turn, drives the imperial exploitation of peoples and regions across the world.

In degrowth we can find a perspective that links these three fundamental objections to capitalist rationality. We could easily imagine a natural, mutual sympathy with socialists and their allies, were it not for the thorough internalisation of productivism by the socialist and labour movement. But perhaps, in these times of crisis, when the thoughtful are seeking and exploring alternatives, there is a growing interest in jettisoning the absurdity of endless growth on a finite planet, along with its pretensions to deliver benefit for the world’s masses. This article has suggested some signs of this within the British Labour Party. Yet Labour has a long way to go before it can be said to have a policy framework that is consistent with what we already know about the limits to growth. A moment of decision is approaching: one that will determine whether the party is genuinely open to the green-left critique of capitalist rationality.

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Further reading

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Notes

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