

Giorgos Kallis
Degrowth

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In the face of formidable eco-social crises, Giorgos Kallis's *Degrowth* lights a way forward, motivates readers to think and act differently, and provides tools to forge new pathways. Kallis aims to advance a theory of degrowth, a transformation that would reduce material throughput of human economies, while equitably enhancing well-being of humans and other nature. His deeper contribution is toward the collaborative development of a paradigm that allows us to perceive, learn about, and engage the world in different ways, a pursuit whose controversies and challenges are tackled bravely in the final chapter.

Whereas earlier work by Kallis and others applies economic analysis to questions raised by degrowth, this book turns the tables to develop a new understanding of economy informed by degrowth conversations. Beyond money and markets, Kallis conceptualises economy as a lively realm of human–environment relations that is always and inseparably material *and* meaningful: 'Economy is the instituted process of interactions between humans and their environments, involving the use of material means for the satisfaction of human values' (p. 17). Kallis insists that even putative 'free markets' do not operate in a vacuum: 'By instituted I mean that the activities that we designate as economic are always socially organised – embedded in political institutions' (p. 21). I would add that economic activities and relations are embedded with equal force in institutions of kinship, gender, religion, language and knowledge.

This economic vision is nourished by historical and anthropological studies of dynamics through which specific economies develop and become institutionalised. Cross-context research shows that no economic activities, relations or laws are universal: like the needs and values they seek to satisfy, these vary across and within populations. A second contributing current, ecological economics, examines the transformation of matter and energy in economic processes governed by laws of thermodynamics, therein demonstrating that even economies conceived as shifting social imaginaries are never materially unreal. To show that economies are never free from power, the third current, political ecology, integrates environmental science with Marxist political economy, feminist economics and postcolonial critiques to explore how differentiation and exploitation shape economic meanings and institutions, and their impacts on biophysical environments.

Confidence that degrowth transformation is possible – even probable – is bolstered by recognition that growth economies themselves are remarkably recent phenomena. Chapter 3 locates incipient expansion of global societal metabolism in the fifteenth century, in tandem with emergence of European colonialism and capitalism (to which I add western science and racism), and shows that the pursuit of growth only came to dominate political and cultural life (together with the new science called 'economics') during the twentieth century. Kallis predicts an early end to this historic period as it is destabilised by planetary limits, depletion of cheap resources, and concomitant inequality and conflict. To counter stubborn belief in the resilience of capitalist growth, I locate its fleeting existence within the deeper history of modern humans, a 200,000 year span throughout which diverse populations thrived and adapted with extremely low societal metabolism and little or no market activity, alongside the occasional expansion and collapse of a 'civilisation'.

Chapter 4 debunks paralysing myths that portray economic growth as indelible human nature, as the means to all good ends, and as destined (and able) to persist indefinitely. It then provides cause to abandon growth in order to curb escalating eco-social damage. Both arguments are supported by a trove of graphics depicting recent acceleration of global rates of population, production, pollution, and consumption of energy and material; as well as cross tabulations showing failure of GDP growth to correlate well with desired changes in indicators of health, happiness, poverty-alleviation, equality, life expectancy, biodiversity and more.

Defining capitalism as ‘a political, cultural and economic system dominated by – and geared around – the imperative of investors to turn a profit’ (p. 43), Kallis finds hope in heterodox practices thriving and adapting alongside capital accumulation (p. 59). Chapter 5 visualises a future economy based in nine embodied principles: end exploitation; exercise direct democracy; localise production; reclaim shared commons; decommodify land, labor and value; and prioritise relationships, *dépense*, diversity and care. These are linked with policies, some already in practice in various contexts (part-time work, ecological tax reform, basic income), and with grassroots initiatives and nowtopias forming solidary economies in Spain, Greece, and elsewhere (urban gardens, cooperatives, eco-housing, local currencies, squats).

Encouraged to forge their own theories and pathways, readers of this book are empowered with key concepts (societal metabolism, entropy, work, exploitation, appropriation, expropriation, value, values, money, commodification, green growth and more) and analytic tools such as Gross Domestic Product, Genuine Prosperity Index, Human Development Index, ecological footprint, energy return on investment, embodied energy and knowledge, etc.

Some of the book’s most intriguing notions surround what Georges Bataille and Onofrio Romano call *dépense*: expenditures not obviously instrumental to survival or economic growth that, in different contexts, take artistic, philosophic, religious and ritual forms. However, I fear that readers’ ability to think creatively about *dépense* activities ranging from pyramid-building to dance parties may be constrained by Kallis’s conventional representation of them as ‘unproductive expenditures’, ‘not useful or necessary’, and ‘waste of resources’. Far from being anti-utilitarian, I argue that these activities do essential work of producing and reproducing the sociocultural systems necessary to sustain human economies. As individuals, members of *Homo sapiens* are pitifully ill-equipped to meet their own biophysical needs or to assure their descendants’ survival. Our key evolutionary feature is a biophysical capacity for symbolic thought and communication that enables *groups* of humans to collaboratively develop kin, religious, linguistic and other systems that survive the individual organism, and that help to produce new generations of humans, their habits and their habitats. So, activities that work to (re)produce social systems are supremely useful and necessary economic endeavours.

I am delighted with Kallis’s forecast (p. 11) that post-growth societies will be characterised by greater investment in popular feasts, philosophy and leisure. In addition to tipping the balance toward more *dépense* and less ‘productive labour’, we might also imagine and practice forms of unalienated labour that transcend the divide. A horizon of possibilities may be glimpsed in my experiences fishing with Belgians who seek leisure and philosophising at the pond as an antidote to productive factory work, and with Amazonian Cofán who carry out their most useful productive activity via excursions that are – simultaneously – contemplative, scientific and pleasurable. Telling stories, making music and arguing about the meaning of life can be pleasurable indulgences. They can also work to sustain and adapt knowledges, cosmologies and politics communicated therein. It is through this nexus of

dépense and production that humans constantly co-create new economic imaginaries and actively transform their worlds.

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