

Autor: Marc Lewald

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Institution: Karlshochschule International University

Professor(s): Dr. Marisol Bock

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Which Theory Of The State Would Be Useful For Pushing The Degrowth-Paradigm?

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1. Introduction

1.1 The degrowth-paradigm

Within the last decades and especially in the last years, many people have come to the realization that we as a society can no longer continue to live in the way we have done in the last decades. Otherwise, it will lead to drastic dimensions on this planet. Be it in the case of climate change, resource scarcity, or general pollution.

In the spirit of this awakening, there has been a movement dealing with this very issue for some time now, and it is probably the best-known counterpart to the liberal growth mindset that has dominated in recent decades. The talk is of the degrowth-paradigm. This describes in its basic features, the rethinking of our current growth-based social policy. (Degrowth, 2022), (Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie, 2022), (Research and Degrowth (R&D), 2022)

Defining the term degrowth is really not easy due to its different interpretations. The first thoughts on the concept were contributed by "(Marx, 1859), (Jevons, 1865), (Soddy, 1922, 1926), (Polanyi, 1944), (Illich, 1973), (Schumacher, 1973)" (Andreonia & Galmarini). There it was more about the general understanding behind such a transformation and its main features. Whereas Georgescu-Roegen takes up these concepts and compared the economic degrowth-paradigm for the first time with the laws of entropy: "The more natural energy is transformed by human industry, the less "usable" energy remains for future generations." (Gheorghica & Fotea 2012, Degrowth economy – origins and conceptualization). The energy described can also be understood as the totality of resources on this planet.

A newer and more detailed understanding of degrowth on which many of today's works are oriented comes from Schneider et al referring to degrowth as "an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term" (Schneider et al., 2010, What is degrowth: definitions and misconceptions). This definition is therefore based on the principles that production and consumption must be reduced and, on the other hand, leads to the creation of a more just world with greater well-being for all of humankind. (Schneider et al., 2010)

However, one can also follow the somewhat simpler definition established at the "First international conference on Economic De-growth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity, Paris, April 18-19th 2008": They describe degrowth as a „voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society.“ (Cosme et al., 2016, 2. The evolution of the degrowth perspective: from the emergence of the idea to the debate of concrete proposals), which also captures the essential aspects of other degrowth definitions, but still has a much stricter participatory focus. (Flip & Schneider, 2008)

We quickly see that the field of degrowth is a very broad one, which makes it difficult to define and describe degrowth as a concept clearly. However, the degrowth-paradigm

describes in any case a form of rethinking in relation to our capitalist system and the associated constant growth and exploitation. This paper will follow the comprehensive definition of Schneider et al. which is one of the most widely used definitions in degrowth academics nowadays, e.g. in the case of Andreonia & Galmarini.

In addition, the degrowth paradigm is frequently referred to in the context of this work. This refers to the totality of all processes and efforts related to the world of degrowth, be it in an academic or personal sphere.

1.2 Personal Interest

First and foremost, the choice of topic for this paper is based on personal preferences. While I will be as neutral as possible in the course of the paper, I must nevertheless confess that I am a great supporter of the idea behind the concept of degrowth. I studied economics myself for a year until the book "Prosperity without Growth" by Tim Jackson fell into my hands. Immediately I was enthusiastic about the idea, which was quite controversial for me and my understanding of economics at that time. In the years that followed, I also continued to study concepts such as the Circular Economy and the Prosperity Economy. (Jackson, 2008)

A lot has already changed in favor of the degrowth paradigm since I read the book in 2017, 5 years ago, but not enough to speak of the concept of degrowth being a topic of discussion in our mainstream of the population. The question arises, where the progression of the degrowth-paradigm does find its limits so far?

In my opinion, three phases or steps are essential for the implementation or progression of any idea or concept, thus also for the concept of degrowth. These include the three phases attention, planning, and implementation. The attention phase is about drawing attention to a project in order to bring it closer to the people in the first place. This should be done as neutrally and without fear as possible. Then the planning phase begins. In this phase, in my opinion, the next steps for the implementation of an idea must be thought through, so that its implementation or realization creates the greatest possible benefit. Last but not least is the implementation or execution of each idea itself.

I am mainly concerned in this work with the 3rd phase, which is how something can be implemented. In most cases that happens for me through state influence, be it directly or indirectly. Therefore, in the course of this work, we look more closely at the connection between state theory and degrowth, as well as the question of which state theory could be the right one for the implementation of the concept of degrowth. First of all, however, we will face the fundamental question: Why working with the state in the first place?, apart from my personal preferences, and my personal belief that this change has to happen through state action.

1.3 Why working with the state?

It is a far-reaching idea, which should change the entire population in its innermost structures. In virtually no case is there any way around the state in implementing this idea, because it is for most of us our legislative and law-making power. And it is likely that "opponents" of the degrowth concept will not voluntarily decide to change the system in which they managed to accumulate so much capital and wealth.

When dealing with the topic of degrowth and the question of this implementation, one quickly comes to the conclusion that a large part of the previous academic treatment of the topic neglects necessary questions in the relationship of the state and the concept of degrowth. If, however, it is mainly the French consideration of the theory of the state and degrowth that stands out, although historically they have also always been very closely linked to the theory of the state. Accordingly, there is a clear academic gap in the field of degrowth with regard to the examination of the state. While many authors call for clear and hard measures, only a few deal with the question of how these measures can really be implemented with the help or consideration of the state. (D'Alisa & Kallis 2020)

Moreover, the question arises whether the theories of the state that have dominated the academic discourse to date really obstruct a possibility for change, or whether they miss essential aspects of the considerations necessary for a degrowth-paradigm shift.

2. Main Part - Which theory of the state could be necessary for degrowth?

In order to implement such reforms with the help of the state, however, it requires a clear understanding of which of the state theories would be suitable for a degrowth-paradigm. Among the best known theories of the state are e.g. anarchy, socialism and democracy. However, very few of these concepts are fully implemented in practice, they are and remain just theories.

In the case of democracy, this is of course the most widespread and lived theory. In addition, many people believe that a degrowth-paradigm shift can only take place in a democracy. As a reason for this, they cite the great successes that have already been achieved by democratic states in areas of sustainability and put these successes in comparison to other, for example, autocratic states. However, it is also the only state theory that can be really investigated in this regard. (Ott, 2012), (D'Alisa & Kallis 2020)

Beyond the currently lived and popular theories, there are however still further exciting ideas and concepts, which could promise a larger success than the so far converted and mentioned state theories. Whereby one should say here that a large part of the humans concerned with the topic Degrowth occupy a collapse demand, and/or the opinion are that this would be necessary, in order to destroy the old system or at all renewed place for

alternatives create. Among them, of course, there are also some opinions that believe that a collapse in our current system can no longer be prevented at all. (Garcia, 2012), (D'Alisa & Kallis 2020)

This collapse is a widespread topic in the field of degrowth and is also worked with by academia e.g. by (Heikkurinen, 2019). In part, this collapse can also be understood as part of the capitalist system, which must inevitably be carried out in a capitalist system to create the possibility for new growth and prosperity. The only problem with this collapse is what it might entail. There is the question of violence. How would such a collapse work without the use of violence or the evocation of violence? How would the system change and organize itself after such a collapse?

Apart from the radical approaches regarding a collapse that will might throw the world into chaos, there are primarily two approaches that would support a maybe more realistic shift towards a degrowth-paradigm and probably even make it possible. These include in the first place the idea of symbiotic States and furthermore the approach behind an Integral State by Antonio Gramsci.

2.1 Theory of the state

However, before we will address the two approaches regarding a realistic state theory for the degrowth-paradigm, a clear explanation of the concept of state theory is needed, especially as it's a concept really hard to grasp on. State theory finds its beginnings in ancient Greece with concepts such as the "polis", a first city-state. Back then, state theory was about looking at how a state could be built and organized to provide the best possible life for its inhabitants. This includes many other sub-sciences and is also always dependent on the respective of the Zeitgeist. While nowadays state theory covers the field of economics, in earlier years it was more about the philosophical questions behind state theory. Accordingly, we see the theory of the state as an abstract concept to organize or analyze different forms of the state.

So we see that it is not necessarily a new idea to deal with the state and the organization in order to bring about a change in society, whatever this may look like. However, this also quickly makes clear how important it is to consider the theory of the state in relation to degrowth. Only with the help of this can a state really make the changes that come with a switch to a degrowth-paradigm. In the interaction of state theory and the degrowth-paradigm, however, apart from the overall collapse of the system, there are as already mentioned primarily two realistic state theories that promise a maybe more suitable possibility for change.

These are more realistic forms of state theory, since all the forms of state theory mentioned so far, as well as most work in the field of degrowth, see the state as a form of oppression (Hirschfeld, 2022).

Most advocates of the degrowth-paradigm also believe that it is not only the state that needs to change, but also its society. This dualistic connection between state and society may be the key to the expansion of the degrowth-paradigm.

2.2 Symbiotic State

Let's start with the symbiotic state at the very beginning. In the case of symbiosis, the underlying concept, it is usually any form of long-term partnership that involves the intersubjective relationship of two entities. The best known partnerships of this kind are, for example, the anemone fish and corals, or also a large part of the parasites known to us today.

If one now transfers this concept to state theory, in the case of a symbiotic state it is now a matter of working primarily with the state itself. "Symbiotic transformations want to work with and use the state to construct social power within and outside of the state (Wright, 2010)" (Laurens van der Wal, 2020, B. strategic ordering). This means that in a symbiotic approach to state theory, the state itself and its scope for action play an enormously important role. And the state is shown as an own entity that influences social powers as another entity.

After Mary P. Murphys (Murphy, 2013), symbiotic transformations "deepen the institutional forms of popular social empowerment while simultaneously helping solve certain practical problems; 'non-reformist reforms' simultaneously make life better within the existing economic system but expand the potential for future advances of democratic power." (Murphy, 2013, Introduction). It is therefore clear that the symbiotic state is a very long-term planned concept that is intended to enable future generations to have more influence.

However, as already noted, the symbiotic concepts do not try to convince with a new form of the economy or the state, but rather with the possibility to shape and change them in themselves through the state. Thus it comes to the fact that the symbiotic state theory must place itself to large criticism, since it does not solve for many Degrowth-Advocates the fundamental problems of the current system necessarily, and/or also not fast enough. (D'Alisa & Kallis 2020)

2.3 Integral State

Based on this critique, I would like to discuss another theory of the state that is possibly the most realistic and implementable to date when it comes to transforming to a degrowth-paradigm shift. This is the Integral State approach pioneered primarily by Antonio Gramsci, a 20th century Italian intellectual, who is mainly recognized for his „prisoners notebooks“ (Harman, 2007). During his lifetime, he developed among many other theories, such as his concept on hegemony, a concept of the state that successfully combined the interrelationship of social, societal, and systematic upheavals, and yet allowed for their different considerations. (Britannica, 2022)

At the beginning of his career, Antonio Gramsci also believed that a great crash was needed to bring about a transformation. However, after the First World War, he had to realize with regret that the desired changes that he hoped for, did not occur. In his opinion, this was due to the fact that previous theories of the state involved an aspect of oppression and that they lacked an essential part of the theory of the state (Hirschfeld, 2022). This was due to the fact that, for Gramsci, the state consisted of more than just the pure state in the strict sense. According to Gramsci, the state would have to be viewed through the two realms of political society and civil society. And with the integral state, this would not end up in a separate consideration, as before, but in a common one. Gramsci was primarily concerned with the aspect of coercion in the case of the state, i.e. political society, while in the case of civil society he was primarily concerned with the aspect of consensus. (Thomas, 2009)

Thus, in the integral state, all considerations are made not on the basis of the state itself, such as the army, the police, the bureaucracy, or national educational institutions, but also on the basis of civil society, which includes, for example, NGOs, trade unions, or voluntary organizations. This leads to the fact that the consideration with the help of the integral state, goes beyond the conventional boundaries of the state and also includes aspects that seem to be irrelevant in other state theories. This could possibly be the decisive point, along with the fact that people are also heard in the integral state and their wishes and ideas are incorporated.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Which theory of the state could be necessary for degrowth?

The question of the perfect theory of the state to enable or advance a degrowth-paradigm is, of course, not a simple one. Nevertheless, it can be said that there are some approaches that lend themselves more or less well to this. There is, for example, also enough evidence to suggest that democracy is sufficient as a current theory of the state. However, enough advocates of the degrowth-paradigm would disagree with this.

For them, an approach is needed that goes beyond the limits of what has been possible so far, and both the symbiotic and the integral view of a state are very well suited for this purpose. They link state theory in the narrower sense with society, which is an essential part of the desired transformation. Without the consideration of society and its influence on the state itself, a theory of the state is missing an essential part.

Therefore, the consideration through Gramsci's integral state with its clear dualistic character is best suited to consider or even enable a transformation towards a degrowth paradigm-shift. In this context, the consideration through the aspect of coercion and consensus is especially crucial, since the lack of the interplay of these two factors could well have been an obstacle for the degrowth-paradigm-shift so far.

3.2 Outlook

Of course, it remains to be seen how and with the help of which state theory the degrowth-paradigm-shift could come about. However, the consideration of the integral state offers a very good starting point for future work with regard to the degrowth-paradigm and the state, which we can also be determined on the basis of various works. It must also be said, however, that the topic of degrowth is currently enjoying great popularity and it can be assumed that more and more people will deal with the topic, both in private and academic settings.

This will inevitably lead to a closer look at the state in relation to degrowth and hopefully close the research gap in relation to the state and state theory that has been pointed out in this work. This would namely lead to a great contribution to the advancement of a degrowth-paradigm that I and hopefully soon a large part of the people would be happy to see. Because at the end of the day, this is about saving ourselves.

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