

## Degrowth, Capitalism and Rødt – an Ecosocialist Perspective

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Many thanks to the organisers for initiating and arranging this first webinar in a series on degrowth - post-capitalist alternatives and possibilities, leading up to the international conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics in Oslo in June 2025. And thank you for inviting me, as a member of the radical left party Rødt and its Environmental and Industrial Policy Committee, to share some views on the issue, which I will do from an ecosocialist perspective, while trying to sort out some political implications.

As pointed out in the invitation: *The problem of growth is a complex question which is deeply intertwined with capitalism as a “way of life”.*

The question is, as eloquently formulated, ...*whether a profound societal transformation towards post-capitalism is possible in lieu of apocalypse.*

There is an underlying assumption here, with which I could not agree more, namely, that the survival of capitalism, with its internal drive for never ending growth, is at odds with the survival of human civilisation. We cannot have both, it's one or the other.

There is an urgent need to prioritize these questions that are of literally vital importance. Maybe not so much the question of whether a profound societal transformation towards post-capitalism is POSSIBLE, as the questions of what such a transformation should look like, and how we can MAKE it possible.

My point of departure is that when we talk about growth and degrowth, we really talk about production:

- production of what,
- controlled by whom,
- for which purpose,
- and with what effects?

In what follows I shall:

1. First give a brief outlook on degrowth as a political issue.
2. Then present an anti-capitalist and ecosocialist perspective on capitalism and degrowth.
3. Followed by some examples on how Rødt's stance on degrowth translates into concrete policies.
4. And finally I shall make some concluding remarks on what must be done.

What I shall not go deeply into this time, although a central part of the degrowth discussion, is the global and international dimension. I will, however, include some remarks on the need for an international fee on shipping and aviation at the end of the paper. (For a good overview article on degrowth, which also relates to the global South see

[‘These ideas are incredibly popular’: what is degrowth and can it save the planet? | Green economy | The Guardian](#))

Let me add before proceeding that although a member of Rødt, I am not speaking ON BEHALF OF Rødt. Our thinking and policy on degrowth, is a work in progress, and an ongoing discussion, of which I am one participant among many.

There are particularly two issues on which the views expressed in the following have not become part of the official party line, although several of us work for that to happen, namely the need for a more explicit ecosocialist programme, as well as the need for a much tougher carbon fee and dividend-policy, issues that I shall come back to.

### **1. Degrowth as a political issue**

Let me start with a short outlook on degrowth as a political issue, related to Norway and the energy sector. The growth critique in Norway, as in the Western world at large, goes back to the 60s when the post-war generation increasingly questioned the consequences of consumerism and the dominating objective of continuous economic growth. Although a minority, mainly to be found to the left of the ruling social democratic party, the growth critiques had some broader appeal in the population, sharing what might be seen as a historically rooted Norwegian culture of respect and appreciation for nature.

When the exploitation of the hydropower resources started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and accelerated during the decades after The second world, it took place on the basis of an unwritten social contract between the government and the people: In return for the loss of highly valued nature, like waterfalls, rivers and mountain ranges, that were to be replaced by tubes, gigantic dams and artificial lakes, the values produced should be democratically managed and give benefits to the people: electrification, public infrastructure, industrial jobs, expansion of the welfare state etc. This was obtained through national, democratic control and management of the hydropower resources, including concession laws, regulations and taxation.

During the 70s and 80s new hydropower development projects, like Mardøla and Alta made the environmental costs of modernisation and growth increasingly evident to broader sections of the public. There was a turning of attitudes towards so-called immaterial values. Environmental organisations and movements like The Future in Our Hands, with its appeal to zero growth, saw their support grow. Ecopolitical awareness and grassroots activism spread, particularly among the educated young and in the urban middle class, but also in the districts and among people living from small scale agriculture and fisheries.

Still, the idea of zero growth never got to dominate politics. One reason was that during the 70s and 80s Norway became a major oil and gas producer, earning enormous revenues, which contributed to an unprecedented rise in the general standard of living, while at the same time avoiding the ills of Dutch disease and resource curse. The parliament and government secured national, democratic control of the sector through giving the state petroleum company Statoil a dominant role, and through heavy taxation of the otherwise mainly foreign petrol companies operating in the North Sea. Thereby the values generated basically stayed in Norway, contributing to strong economic growth that benefited the society and population at large, who saw an unprecedented increase in their living standards. The petroleum exploration certainly had negative consequences for fisheries and nature, that led to opposition and conflicts, but the overall picture was that the social contract between government and people stayed strong.

Another reason for the growth critique not to become hegemonic, was that a more moderate variety of the growth critique was coopted by the ruling elites, when the term *sustainable development* was introduced during the late 80s by Gro Harlem Brundtland, our prime minister at the time, 'mother of the country' and head of the UN commission on environment and development. The basic idea in the commission's report *Our Common Future* introduced, which gained wide acceptance up to, and after, the Rio 1992 conference, and has stayed dominant till this day, was that it is possible and desirable to make capitalist growth ecologically and socially sustainable, which is also a prerequisite for avoiding environmental degradation, especially in the poor South.

So, the positive standing of growth as such was never really threatened. In recent years, however, there have been signs of a weakening of the social contract on energy, which lies at the basis of the support for growth. The government, pressed and expected to do better on Norwegian climate obligations, has increasingly turned to prioritising the production of more renewable energy and electric power over other goals, like preservation of nature and biological diversity. This is well captured in the title of a recent white paper on the issue, *More of Everything – Faster*, [NOU 2023: 3 \(regjeringen.no\)](#) Another case in point is the newly released report on future perspectives, *Perspektivmeldinga*, [Meld. St. 31 \(2023–2024\) \(regjeringen.no\)](#) We are now seeing a fast-growing green industrial complex that engages actively with national and local authorities to open up mountains, grazing land, cultivated land, forests, sea areas, and even the seabed, for investors and developers. Exploration of wind, sun and mineral resources is, rather aggressively, promoted as a positive and necessary contribution to ‘the green transition’, and is promised to have positive effects for the local communities affected.

There has been widespread popular opposition against the planned and implemented projects, particularly windmill parks, but also large-scale solar projects and data centres conflicting with important recreational interests, protection of biological diversity, and Sami reindeer husbandry and indigenous rights. This, however, has not translated into zero growth sentiments, not to speak of demands for degrowth and post-capitalist alternatives. Rather, a driving force behind the protests, particularly among lower income groups and in the districts, has been a frustration not only with the detrimental effects of the renewable energy projects to nature, but also with the negative social effects of climate policies formed by and widely seen to serve the interests of the urban elites. Historically this also be seen in light of the unwillingness of the green side to address environmental issues in terms of the felt material problems of the working class, whether the industrial or non-industrial, and the consequent lack of priority for building alliances with the trade union movement. In short, low-income sections of the population have become alienated from a climate project resonating badly with their material interests.

The political consequences of this follow a similar pattern to that seen in other countries. Sections of the population, sharing an experience of falling behind, and not getting access to their fair share of the values created, see themselves, and often rightfully so, as being hit disproportionately hard by various climate measures, like flat transportation fees. As a result many direct their political sympathies towards parties, especially to the far right, that are not keen on climate and nature conservation, while embracing national economic growth. Recent East German state elections showed an additional tendency for large numbers to vote not only for the far right, but also for the newly established and proclaimed far LEFT alternative, Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht, which focuses on ordinary people’s felt problems, while denouncing environmental politics and praising national, economic growth. The same type of rhetoric can be seen in the milieu around the leading magazine on the American left, Jacobin, putting labour and economic growth before the environment.

In Rødt we think there is a lesson to be drawn from this, which forms the basis of our programme for socially just environmental policies: Without addressing the material problems of ordinary people, and building broader left alliances, that include the labour movement and the districts, of which the new popular front in France is a promising but rare example, the political ground for a progressive degrowth project seems likely to stay infertile.

## **2. Capitalism and degrowth – an anti-capitalist and ecosocialist perspective**

Let me continue with some comments on degrowth and ecosocialism. An important contribution to the idea of degrowth, a term that was first coined by the early ecosocialist Andre Gorz back in 1972, was Tim Jackson’s landmark book from 2009, with the telling title *Prosperity without Growth. Economics For a Definite Planet*. In it he unmasks the slogan of green growth and the related idea

that growing the economy, if done smartly, can be delinked from growing the ecological footprint, which he shows to be another example of capitalist business as usual.

He acknowledges that technological innovations and productivity improvements tend to make the content of energy and matter in each unit of goods and services produced to go down. The problem, however, is that the capitalist, systemic demand for never ending profits means that the total amount of units produced has to - and does! - increase exponentially. The result is that although there is a reduction of inputs in each unit produced, this is by far compensated by an ever-larger TOTAL quantity of energy and matter used. While there may be individual examples of delinking, he documents these to be the exceptions, which in any case do not change the overall picture of a growing global economy causing a growing global ecological footprint, as seen in continuing increases in global greenhouse gas emissions, loss of nature areas, toxic pollution, and the like.

Another point emphasized by Jackson is that studies uniformly document no positive correlation between, on the one hand, rising standard of living above levels typical for industrialised countries in the 70s, and on the other hand, improved life quality; rather the correlation is negative. A no growth society with prosperity, where everybody has enough to meet their basic needs, is possible if the economy is steered away from overconsumption, growing inequalities, artificial and luxury needs, wasteful production and advertising. The problem, however, is that such a change would hardly be compatible with the workings of the capitalist system, which runs according to the principle that enough is not enough.

The ecosocialist school of thought, to which belong, and from which Rødt has drawn many elements without adopting it as a comprehensive framework, goes back to Marx' notion of the capitalist mode of production causing a growing rift in the social metabolism, that is, the exchange of energy and matter, between man and nature, considered the two original sources of wealth. Ecosocialism as an analytical tool, and a vision of a society with substantial equality and ecological sustainability, democratically governed by the associated producers, has developed considerably and gained influence during the last decades. Leading figures in this are found in the milieu around the American independent socialist magazine, *Monthly Review*, including its editor, Marxist ecologist John Bellamy Foster and Jason Hickel, the author of *Less is more. How Degrowth Will Save the World* from 2020.

From the ecosocialist perspective capitalism is a system of generalised commodity production, which turns ever larger parts of society and the natural world into commodities, since that is the form through which the capitalists, the owners of the means of production, can reach their one goal, to produce profits. What characterises the commodity, is namely that it contains three different values, use value, exchange value and surplus value. For the capitalist, the use value of the commodities - what is produced, how and for what use - is secondary. What counts is the exchange value, which equals the willingness of the market to pay for the product. That is so, because it is by realising the exchange value of the commodity through the sale, that the third and most important value for capital, the surplus value added by labour and nature, can be realised as profits.

Under capitalism, therefore, production as a total measured in GNP, which really is a measure of the total exchange value produced in the economy. Consequently, economic GNP growth is imperative, not only for the individual capitalists, but for the system, because without it, there will be no profits, only deep crisis. The rest of us will be in deep trouble too because largely we do not own the means of production or the means of living. We are dependent on the employers' willingness to buy the one productive asset we own, our labour force, to earn an income, and get the necessities we need from the market. This means that as individuals we are structurally placed in a weak position with little power over our situation, which can only be changed by joining forces and acting collectively on our common interests.

There are several important political implications of the workings of capitalism for degrowth, let me mention a few. Firstly, the primary purpose of production under capitalism is never to produce use values, that is, goods to satisfy human needs. That might come as a side effect, but the driving economic purpose, beyond democratic control is, and will always be, to produce profits – you can ask any managing director or steering board chair! That represents a challenge for degrowth as a viable alternative since the point is not only to reduce the total throughput of energy and matter, and thereby the ecological footprint, but to change the purpose of production to providing use values for human and ecological needs, not the needs of capital, and to socialize the surplus value, so that it can serve the common good. Both purposes demand planning and democratic control of the economy, and are at odds with the system's profit imperative, as well as private ownership and the so-called free market.

Secondly, even though electricity produced from renewable sources like solar panels and wind-turbines, has become cheap compared to electricity from fossil energy because of falling costs, major changes in investment priorities are not seen in the sector. The reason is, as showed by Brett Christophers in a new book, that the profit margins are much higher in the fossil sector than in renewables. So, when Equinor, the heir to Statoil, in which the Norwegian state has a majority share, present their investment plans and are asked why not more is invested in renewables, in line with their proclaimed ambition, the answer is that as a business company they must always relate to the demand in the market, and base their decisions on commercial considerations.

Thirdly, and related to this, major political goals on climate and energy tend to stay goals, that is, unachieved. A telling example is the fact that for thirty-five years and 28 COPs global emissions have continued to rise, despite that in the same period targets for reduced CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions have figured high on the world's agenda. As for the so-called transition to renewables, it is true that during the last two decades there has been a growing surge in investments, but renewable energy's share of the world's total energy stays approximately the same, around 20 %, with fossil steady at 80 %, meaning that there has been a similar growth in the production of fossil energy. Renewable energy has not come instead of, but in addition to, fossil energy. It is business as usual. Growth rules!

### **3. Rødt's degrowth policy**

Now, let's turn to Rødt's degrowth policy. Rødt is a consequent anti-capitalist, working class party, fighting against 'Inequality-Norway', og for a socially just and ecologically sustainable society that we believe can only be fully realised under socialism, a system in which democracy reigns not only in politics, but also in the economy. We also do believe that political struggle is not only possible but essential under the present system, to change things here and now for the better, and to build broad alliances for structural reforms that can bring us closer to socialism. For this to happen, a leading role must be played by the working class, meaning the great majority, I would say the around 80 % of us who depend on selling our labour to earn a living, and who produce the surplus value. It is only the working class that has a strong, common interest in bringing capitalist class rule to an end, and also has the power to do so, by virtue of our sheer numbers and being the source of the surplus value produced in society. The potential power of the working class can, and should, be realised through organising and collective action.

Degrowth as a term is not much used in Rødt's policy documents or rhetoric, nevertheless, we have a number of what might be called degrowth leaning policies, especially in the energy field, which of course is basic for growth. Let me briefly mention three examples.

The party's *Power Plan* from last year states that the country's hydropower stations and infrastructure should be owned and managed by the public sector, locally and nationally, for the benefit of the inhabitants, industry and local communities, who historically have financed the investments in the sector, and sacrificed nature for the sake of it. Following this is our proposal for a

two-price system for electricity, where necessary consumption is to be politically priced at a guaranteed maximum price of 0,35 kr/kwh, in accordance with the low production costs of 0,12 kr/kwh, whereas overconsumption will be charged the unregulated marked price, serving the twin goals of securing the country's industry and inhabitants, who endure cold, long and dark winters, access to clean and cheap power for basic needs, while reducing overconsumption.

A second example is the party's *Power Plan* proposing concrete measures that can reduce the need for more power, quantified in terawatt hours saved, and thereby prevent the clearing of more land and nature for new energy projects. It explores and suggests several positive measures like energy saving in building construction and industry, installing solar panels on built surfaces, upgrading of existing hydropower infrastructure, and exploration of terrestrial energy. The plan also suggests negative measures like stopping the electrification of the North Sea petroleum installations through transmission of power from the mainland, and prohibiting the establishment of power consuming data and crypto centres.

My third example is our *Climate rebate* policy, a light version of renowned climate scientist James Hansen's *Carbon fee and dividend* proposal, of which The Green Party and The Socialist Left Party have their own light versions, and which is now implemented in modified form in countries like Canada, Austria and Switzerland. The rationale behind, is that for emissions to be reduced as much and as quickly as the climate crisis demands, the production of fossil fuels, the major source of emissions, must be made less profitable for the energy companies, and the fossil fuel more expensive for the consumers. To obtain this, a high and predictably rising CO2 fee shall be imposed on the producers and importers of fossil fuels, to be repaid monthly, with an equal amount to each inhabitant at 18 or older who have an income below the national average. This means that the higher the carbon fee gets, the more expensive the products and services with a carbon content will become, the further the demand for and consumption of fossil fuels will fall, the more the emissions will decline, AND the more the middle and low-income groups will gain economically.

Another example of a degrowth leaning Rødt policy is the proposal to introduce the six-hour working day, which I will not go into here.

#### **4. What must be done?**

To conclude, what must be done if degrowth is to become a feasible political project, and not only a theoretical exercise, however interesting?

Firstly, a truly democratic and socially just degrowth project can only succeed if the working-class plays a leading role in it, and it is based on a broad, progressive alliance, including the trade-union movement.

Secondly, degrowth strategies and policies must be guided by a realistic and critical analysis of capitalism that can identify and evaluate the driving mechanisms and dominant class forces of the system that are likely to resist degrowth, as well as the social forces and interests that must be mobilised to win.

Thirdly, structural, ecosocialist reforms must be developed and forwarded that can mobilise the working people and change the power balance between the class forces of labour and capital to the advantage of the former. As for degrowth, that means reforms that tackle existential ecological problems like the climate crisis through policies that are not only environmentally effective, but also responsive to ordinary people's material needs, thereby making them popular – and powerful!

To go for a full-blown *Carbon Fee and Dividend* policy would be an important step. Such a structural reform would mean a much higher and faster growing carbon fee, and consequently a much higher

and faster growing monthly amount repaid to people, as compared to the current light versions. This will make sure that the ensuing increase in fuel prices, which is necessary to make fossil consumption and emissions come down, will not lead to yellow west protests and nationalistic growth sympathies.

The higher the carbon fee, the more low- and middle-income groups will gain, and the more popular - and powerful! - the policy will be.

One thousand kroner to each person each month from 2026, increasing to 2 000 the next year, then 3000, and so on, for as long as it takes to get the emissions down to zero.

Progressive parties, like Rødt, SV and MDG, together with the trade unions and environmental organisations like the Norwegian Friends of The Earth and The Grandparents' Climate Campaign should consider joining forces and make this a major, unifying issue in the running up to the coming parliamentary election.

In addition, we should press for a high and increasing fee on international shipping and aviation, to go into a UN solidarity fund for climate support and mitigation in the global South.

Thank you for your attention.