

The rise and fall of growth?

Post-capitalist alternatives and possibilities

Prof. Emil A. Røyrvik
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Dep. of sociology and political science, NTNU



“... it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Frederic Jameson 2003)

“There is no alternative” – Margaret Thatcher, early 1980s

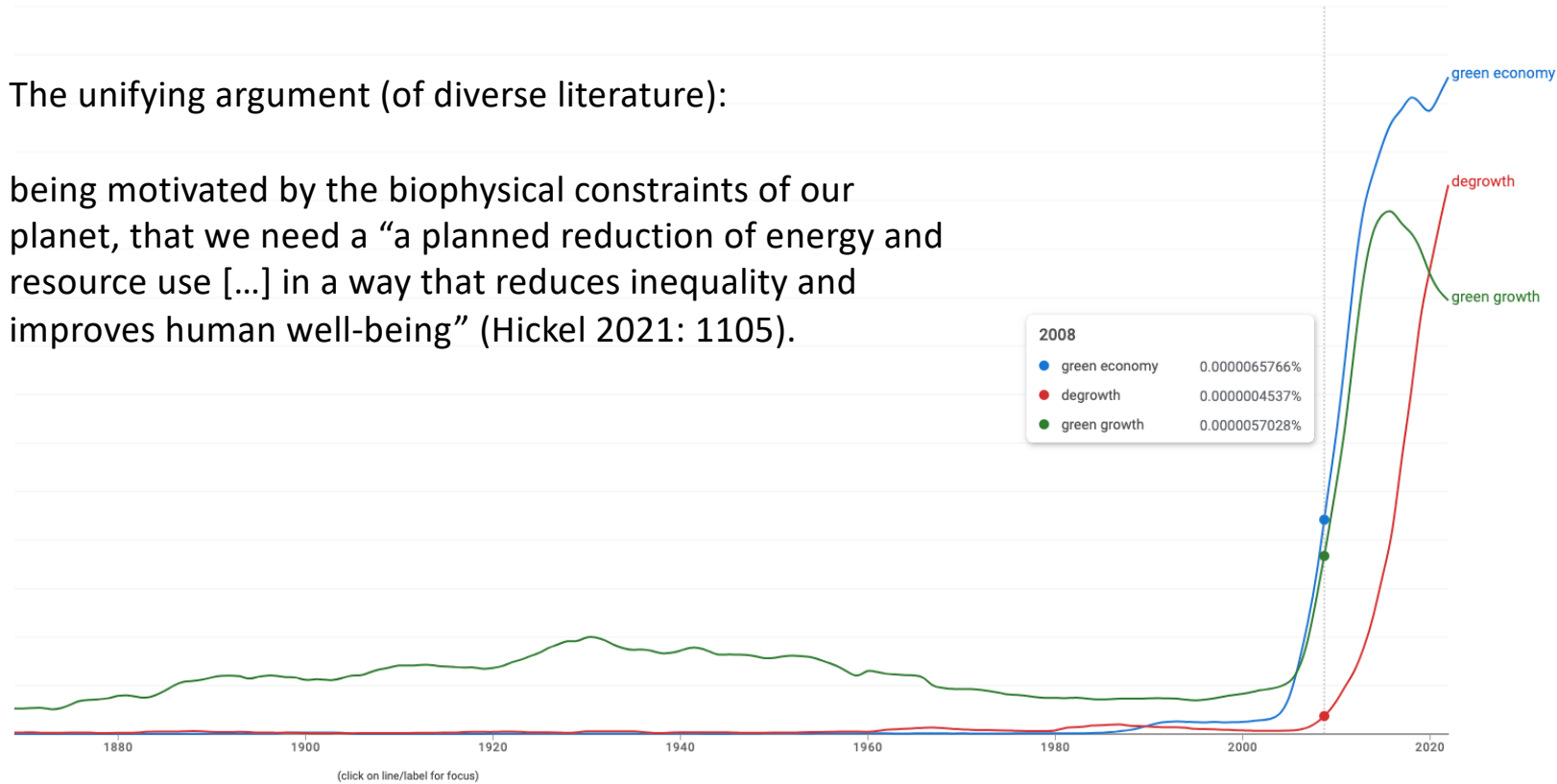
“Another world is possible” – motto of the World Social Forum, 2000s

My perspective: Transformation *is* possible – given certain very difficult and hard to achieve *preconditions* – also without apocalypse

Explosion of degrowth/post-growth literature

The unifying argument (of diverse literature):

being motivated by the biophysical constraints of our planet, that we need a “a planned reduction of energy and resource use [...] in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being” (Hickel 2021: 1105).



The (sociological) problem of growth (and degrowth)

- Growth (and thus degrowth) is a polysemic and therefore a tricky concept. This explains a lot of its popularity. «Growth is good». It means a variety of different things. Need to distinguish what we are talking about.
- Growth 1: the basis of all life and nature (biosphere); Growth 2: human and social (mental, emotional, moral, community etc) growth (often called «flourishing» to distinguish it from) Growth 3: *economic, capital, market, material, production, consumption and financial growth*.
- Growth 3 is at the core of capitalism as an economic and social system and «way of life» (socio-economic-ecological system); embedded in the structures of *modern societies*. (Children are appropriated for capital growth almost from before the day they are born).
- Critical perspective: The continued imperative of Growth 3 *undermines* the conditions for growth 1 and 2. Capitalism perpetuates «polycrises» and *eliminable* forms of human suffering (Wright 2010).
- We find ourselves victims of a «totalitarian» growth imperative («veksttvang»), «doomed to economic growth even when the only scarcity is the lack of scarcity» (Rosa 2024.)



OPINION

Opinions | Environment

The dark side of the Nordic model

Scandinavian countries may top every ranking on human development, but they are a disaster for the environment.



Jason Hickel

Professor at the Institute for Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA-UAB) and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts

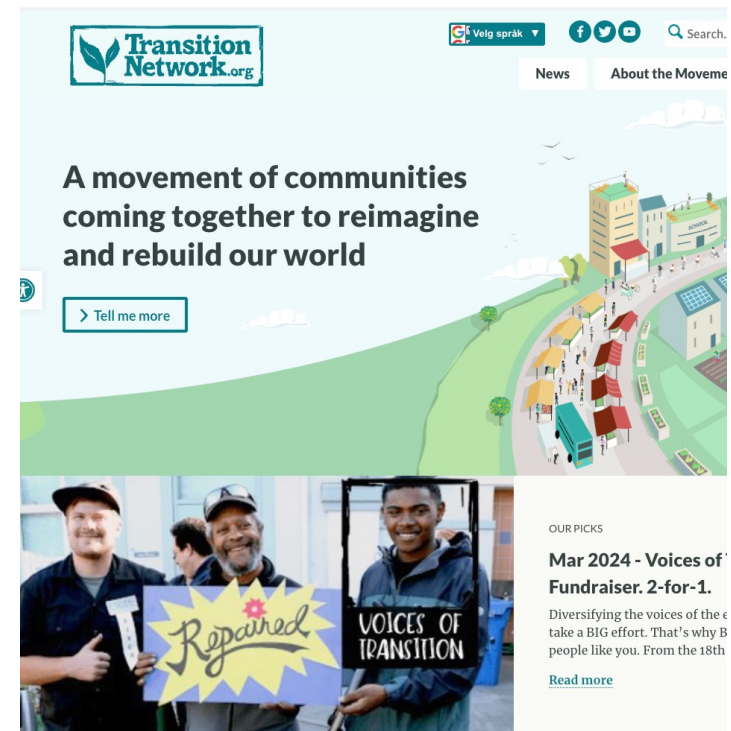


6 Dec 2019



Constraints and possibilities

- «Green growth» is based on the idea of decoupling growth from resource and energy use. (a highly *unlikely* possibility).
- But decoupling of material/economic growth from human and ecological well-being and the good life (happines, life satisfaction etc) is well documented.
- Numerous studies in anthropology documents “good life” in non-growth societies: e.g. on average 15 hour “work week” among foragers (equals Keynes prediction from 1930 about 2030).
- Growth is a very *new* social phenomenon. Market economies need not to grow to function (Irmén 2011)
- There is nothing in neoclassical models to suggest that zero or negative growth is incompatible with full employment or economic stability (Kallis et al. 2018).
- Perceived shortage of concrete policy proposals and political implications of much degrowth literature (Engler et al. 2024)



Some policy examples

- Redistribution of wealth, work, resources. (5 percent tax on super rich could raise \$ 1.7 trillion a year, to lift 2 billion out of poverty, Oxfam 2023).
- Global tax measures (nature, environmental damage, pollution, wealth + reduce labor tax)
- Reduced working hours
- Universal basic income
- Participatory budgeting
- Direct and deliberative democracy (Decidim etc.)
- Expansion of public services
- Policy frameworks for cooperatives and commons

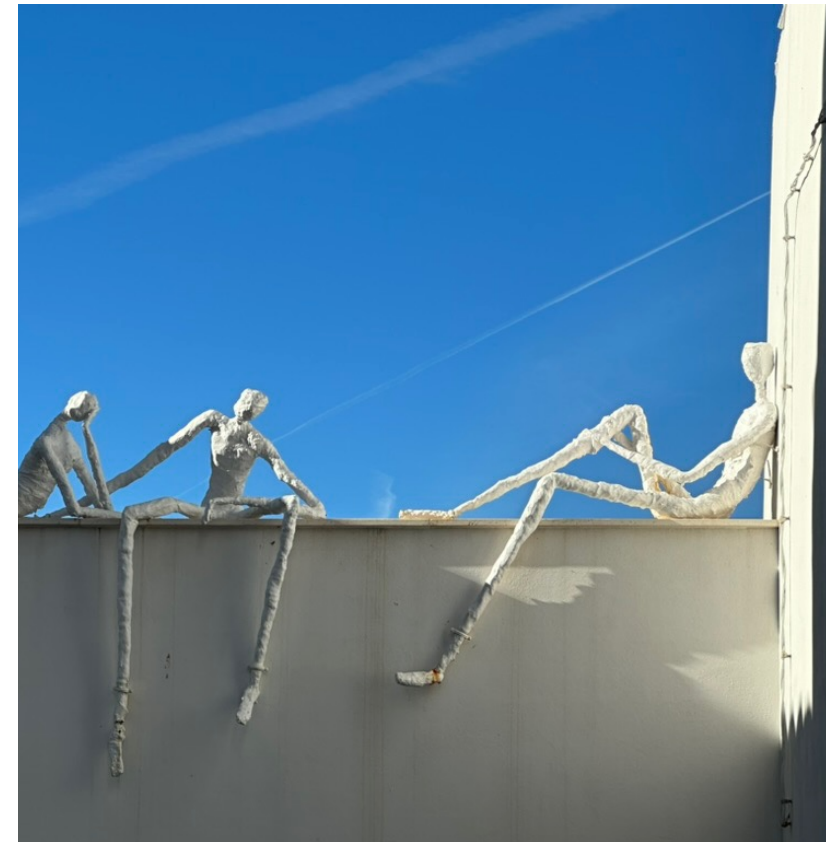
CASE

Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre 1989-present



Necessary (sociological) preconditions for transformation

- Not only less throughput, but a shift and politicisation of terms in which economic relations and identities are constituted and understood.
- Small & large-scale *re-valorization* (change in dominant modes of valuation)
 - From economic growth to human and socioecological flourishing
 - From welfare to well-being
 - From exchange-value to use-value
- Deepen and widen *democratic control* of economy. Assemblies, direct democracy, cooperative economy and organizing, etc.
- *Decommodification, commons & post-consumption*: commons ownership of natural and cultural resources, libraries, DIY, P2P production & networks, expand social/solidarity economy, ecovillages, urban gardening, etc.
- *De-instrumentalization* of life and metamorphosis of formal organizations/institutions (turn to value-based rationality)
- Transformation through «ecosystem» approach (multiple and diverse):
 - From below (prefigurative change)
 - From above (bending and changing the state)
 - From within and against (through resistance and alliances within the «system»).



Political-philosophical traditions

<div style="text-align: right;">Strategic logics</div> <div style="text-align: left;">Modes of transformation</div>	Reducing harms	Transcending structures
<p>Interstitial transformations involve building new forms of social empowerment on the margins of capitalist society, usually outside of spaces dominated by those in power.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Resisting</u></p> <p>E.g. a climate justice demonstration</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Escaping / Building alternatives</u></p> <p>E.g. running an ecovillage without broader political engagement / building a network with others</p>
<p>Symbiotic transformations are aimed at changing existing institutional forms and deepening popular social empowerment within the current system so as to ultimately transform it.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Taming</u></p> <p>E.g. a policy that establishes absolute caps on national CO₂ emissions</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Dismantling</u></p> <p>E.g. a policy that turns big companies into cooperatives in the long-term</p>
<p>Ruptural transformations seek a sharp confrontation or break with existing institutions and social structures (these can be short-term or done in a particular place).</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Halting</u></p> <p>E.g. a disobedience action</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Smashing</u></p> <p>E.g. a factory occupation by workers</p>

Anarchist

Social-democratic

Socialist-revolutionary

Strategic canvas for degrowth

(Wright 2010; Chertkovskaya 2022)

Transformation from below and above (the state)

And from within and outside (in resistance and alliance)

→ post-growth/post-capitalism

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<p>Interstitial transformations involve building new forms of social empowerment on the margins of capitalist society, usually outside of spaces dominated by those in power.</p>	<p>Sámi Fosen <i>Resisting</i> E.g. a climate justice demonstration</p>	<p><i>Escaping / Building alternatives</i> Intentional communities Ecovillages Transition towns Svartlamoen Digital commons P2P Wikipedia</p>
<p>Symbiotic transformations are aimed at changing existing institutional forms and deepening popular social empowerment within the current system so as to ultimately transform it.</p>	<p>Nordic model <i>Timing</i> 6 hour work day <i>absolute caps on national CO₂ emissions</i> Tax policies</p>	<p><i>E.g. a policy that turns big companies into cooperatives in the long-term</i> Participatory budgeting Deci-dim UBI <i>Dismantling</i></p>
<p>Ruptural transformations seek a sharp confrontation or break with existing institutions and social structures (these can be short-term or done in a particular place).</p>	<p><i>Halting</i> Extinction rebellion E.g. a disobedience action</p>	<p><i>Smashing</i> E.g. a factory occupation by workers Italy and Argentina</p>

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