

The politics of degrowth - Technology, ideology, and the fight for eco-socialism

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Degrowth identifies and critiques growth as fundamental to the capitalist system. Growth enriches property owners and the wealthy, leaving the rest of humanity behind with devastating environmental consequences. Tempest member Paul Fleckenstein interviews Gareth Dale on the politics of degrowth and the critique of the ideology of growth in capitalist society.

Degrowth has contributed to Marxism's environmental awakening over the last couple of decades. But unlike some degrowthers who see economic growth as the product of psychological or cultural factors, or of untheorized industrialization, Marxism can—and should—theorize the growth paradigm as a core ideology of capitalist society, a complex myth that lends democratic clothing to the accumulation drive. Tempest member Paul Fleckenstein interviews Gareth Dale on the politics of degrowth and the critique of the ideology of growth in capitalist society.

Paul Fleckenstein: Gareth, can you introduce yourself?

Gareth Dale: I teach politics at a university in London. My research is mainly on environmental politics and the ideology of economic growth. I'm active in my union, in several campaigns, and in a small socialist group, though the lack of resonance of radical socialist ideas is bringing me some sleepless nights. How can I put it? It's interesting to be alive at this conjuncture in which, if capitalism juggernauts on and on, there's a gathering risk of multiple tipping points being tripped en route to the extermination of millions of species, including possibly even our own. Alternatively, of course, radical movements could build and gain critical mass, pull the emergency brake, and look toward a different social system, one based on solidarity and planning, not compulsive accumulation.

PF: You have jumped right to the heart of the dangerous moment we are in and the strategic question of how we can come to grips with the challenge and respond. Decades of business-as-usual has failed to do anything but increase the scale of destruction, despite green rhetoric from elites.

GD: I would add: Business-as-usual has impacted climate science and the discourse around it. Those who predicted the terrifying scale of destruction were marginalized. In the early 2000s, when I began reading systematically about these topics, the sharpest minds were often making the darkest predictions. They could see how the gravity of capital, states, and fossil-fuel interests distorts the climatological lens, pulling predictions toward the complacent end of the scale in a bid to justify only slow and mild reform. Their predictions, sometimes belittled as "catastrophism," took account of that pressure—and rightly so, as we can now see against a skyline of burning hillsides. Even today, atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations are accelerating: Not only are they growing growing, but their growth is accelerating.

PF: Right. And all this is the background for alternatives proposed, and in some adopted by, movements, such as “green growth,” climate justice, the Green New Deal, eco-socialism, and, the main topic for this interview, “degrowth.” Degrowth is better known in Europe than in the United States. Can you explain the concept for those who are not familiar with it?

GD: Each of these alternatives cover broad sets of positions, with many overlaps. But whereas the Green New Deal is at heart social-democratic, degrowth is closer to traditions of utopian socialism, anarchism, and populism (in the Russian Narodnik sense). Degrowth is an eco-political stance attached to a rather diffuse movement. It began to take shape in the early 2000s in France—and that’s one reason why it’s better known in Europe than the United States.

Other reasons include the more militantly capitalist culture of the United States that makes degrowth a tougher hill to climb. With its high rates of flying, meat eating, and car dependency, as well as warming and cooling those big, detached suburban houses, U.S. per capita greenhouse emissions are double the European level. But if I described the degrowth movement as diffuse, I should add that it is gaining a profile, and its socialist wing is very prominent and gaining converts in the United States, too, most recently the Marxist journal Monthly Review.

PF: We can return to movement questions later, but I’m wondering first if you would be able to explain what maybe you think are the strong basic points of degrowth in relation to economic growth versus the planet?

GD: First, degrowth identifies growth as fundamental to the capitalist system and develops a critique of that. Growth tends to enrich property owners and the wealthy, leaving the rest behind. And the environmental consequences of continuous growth are disastrous. Degrowthers are alert to the “destructive forces” that spring from what Marxists call the productive forces.

Second, its critique of growth is based firmly on leftist positions: the deepening of democracy, feminism, and anti-racism. Inasmuch as reducing aggregate consumption is its goal, the focus is on the rich and the rich world.

Third, its critique of capitalism is not restricted to property relations (private versus nationalized property) but extends to the nature and purposes of technology and of consumption. Degrowthers don’t assume that needs and desires are god-given. They have a critical take on the “manufacture of needs.”

Finally, degrowthers recognize that the most fundamental human need is for a habitable planet. They are more sober, more clear-eyed than most on the Left in recognizing that facing up to the multiple environmental crises will require much more than nationalization of the energy sector and investments in renewable energy and electric vehicles (EVs). It requires an extreme reduction in energy use and material throughput, at least in the rich world, a reduction that, while focused on the highest energy users, will affect working people, too, above all in consumption of such goods as flights and beef. Their pitch is that a world of “public luxury and private sufficiency,” with greater equality and democracy, less hierarchy, and much more free time, would enable the quality of life for the masses to improve immeasurably, even if some consumer goods disappear from the menu. The technocratic myth is that decarbonization must center on the invention and deployment of new technologies. ... [T]hey lull us into the belief that new tech can simply be scaled up and plugged in. It’s a state of mind that reflects our own condition of alienation.

PF: Degrowthers reject the “growth paradigm” driving national economic policies, which equates progress and social well-being with growth in gross domestic product (GDP).

There is certainly an ideology of growth that supports business as usual, but capitalist growth is also rooted materially in private ownership, class, markets, and accumulation. You mentioned a developing socialist wing of degrowth, including Monthly Review. What does Marxism bring to degrowth, or what does degrowth bring to Marxism?

GD: Degrowth has contributed to Marxism's environmental awakening over the last couple of decades. But unlike some degrowthers who see economic growth as the product of psychological or cultural factors, or of untheorized industrialization, Marxism can—and should—theorize the growth paradigm as a core ideology of capitalist society, a complex myth that lends democratic clothing to the accumulation drive. Even though growth in the current sense wasn't in use in Marx's day, it's not hard to find in his writings a critique of the growth imperative. And his later followers Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, André Gorz, and Cornelius Castoriadis developed ideas that, together with Romantic and religious critiques of industrial modernity, form the pre-history of the degrowth movement.

The connection between growth ideology and capital accumulation is seen most clearly by Marxists who theorize China and Soviet Russia as state capitalist. If those systems are seen as socialist, the growth drive is not distinctively capitalist. So, what then is it? It's no coincidence that one of the first thinkers to identify the ideology of capitalist modernity as "growth fetishism" was a theorist of state-capitalist Russia, Mike Kidron, back in 1966.

These are some points of theory that Marxism can bring to degrowth, but what of practice? Marxists aligned with the growth-fetishizing traditions—social democracy, Stalinism, Maoism—are mostly unsympathetic to degrowth. As for Leninists, in your and my understanding of the term, I think our role, alongside throwing ourselves into campaigns, is to build common ground with left forces in both the degrowth and the Green New Deal camps. With one, there's a shared language of utopian aspiration, human emancipation, and the need to learn respect for the natural world. With the other, there's a shared commitment to union-based campaigning for climate jobs and for a "just transition."

PF: The Left sometimes displays an uncritical acceptance of capitalist technology. If it could only be put to social use instead of deployed for profit, it could address global heating and perhaps other catastrophic planetary boundary problems like the destruction of natural ecosystems, groundwater depletion, and nitrogen pollution. Electrification of everything, for instance. But what about the ever-expanding colonial mining of metals and complex chemicals needed to build this out? And to those who advocate nuclear power, what about the weapons proliferation and nuclear waste and dangers of fuel mining? Can you talk about the transition to an eco-socialist society, and to what degree highly productive technologies, in say agriculture or manufacturing, can be retained and operated for social ends instead of profit? When is more radical thinking needed about different, even more labor-intensive technologies?

GD: "Uncritical acceptance"—yes, exactly. As I see it, technology fetishism is central to capitalist ideology, to the fantasies through which we reconcile ourselves to this brutal and berserk system. We find hope, even awe, in the tech-centric style with which capital and its cadre affect to address the environmental crisis. Their techno-optimism offers us a "comfort blanket." We can keep flying without limit because planes will fly on biofuel and batteries. We needn't worry about burning oil and gas because tech wizardry will catch and store all the carbon. Shipping will switch from hydrocarbons to hydrogen. For power, we can ramp up nuclear fission, and why not gamble on nuclear fusion, too?

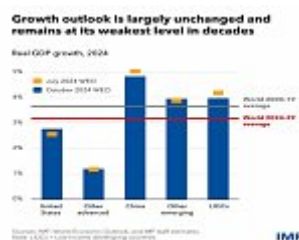
The news cycle churns out corporate press releases trumpeting the latest advances: artificial trees that suck carbon from the breeze, planes fuelled by hydrogen, and so on. These may one distant day

work out, but for now they're the escapist daydreams of a world in which technologies are owned by capital, made in its image, and developed in order to gain profit and military advantage. The technocratic myth is that decarbonization must center on the invention and deployment of new technologies, with a downplaying of the potential for the application of existing technologies and of social-systemic change. And they lull us into the belief that new tech can simply be scaled up and plugged in.

It's a state of mind that reflects our own condition of alienation. When we desire a commodity, we simply click on a button and voilà, there it is at the front door within 24 hours. The commodity's prehistory of labor and nature—the minerals extraction, production, distribution, and so on—are more distant than ever.

As with most ideologies, these tech promises are not “fake news.” There's a grain of sense in each one, at least in engineering terms. But they only appear to seriously reduce greenhouse gas emissions when looked at in abstraction from the overall system. It's banally true that technological advances can improve energy efficiency, but in a capitalist system those gains are generally frittered away through rebound effects. And many of the tech-utopian wagers require us to assume that only the rich world will remain rich.

A chart showing the parallel growth of economic production, climate disaster, and other measures



Source: Smithsonian Institution.

Let's look at a few examples. One is nuclear power. It's a highly centralized and secretive industry, a spin-off from the arms race—and nuclear fusion, too, is heavily connected to warmaking. Fission plants produce expensive power and hazardous waste. You'd think that the threat of missiles targeting Ukraine's Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Station would accelerate the retreat from nuclear energy, but instead the war has spurred its boosterism, supposedly for “energy security” reasons—including among socialists.

Even if we ignore waste and the risk of damage through war, at least we should do the arithmetic. If the current U.S. level of per capita energy consumption were rolled out worldwide (we're internationalists, right?) and powered by nuclear plants, they would have to be multiplied 88-fold. To visualize that, take the current number worldwide, 440, and raise it to 38,720—and then, if your model envisages GDP growth, hike it further. Even if you think nuclear power should only supply, say, a quarter of the world's energy, that'd still be an increase from several hundred to nearly 10,000 nuclear power stations—and mostly sited beside rising seas.

Or take hydrogen. There's a lot of buzz around its green potential, but most hydrogen is produced in a hugely carbon-emitting process. Less than one percent of hydrogen production is “blue,” and only 0.04% is “green.” “Blue” hydrogen is a scam to prolong the drilling for oil and gas—with lots of methane leakage, and probably leakage of the carbon dioxide that will supposedly be “captured and stored.” What we're seeing is fossil-fuel interests using hydrogen as a PR weapon. Their marketing

and lobbying campaigns present a largely fictional substance, blue hydrogen, as a low-carbon “bridge” to a vague future green transition. The ulterior motive is to counter and confuse the growing movement against new drilling for fossil gas and oil.

Or take aviation. There’s a lot of hype around electric planes, but these can only work for small aircraft at short-haul distances. Biofuels work, but they compete with food crops. Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF) work, too, but they’re no magic bullet. In Britain, one company is able to convert waste into SAF. But I interviewed them and then did the sums. Even if we could collect all of Britain’s municipal and business waste, the annual SAF yield would be only a couple of million tons, far less than the amount of fuel used by planes at Britain’s airports each year. This is why serious engineers, the ones who look at the big picture and not just the technology itself, argue the aviation industry has to be, basically, shut down. Look at the Absolute Zero report by the UK FIRES research group. They’re not Marxists or degrowthers; they’re engineers who take seriously the UK Climate Change Act, which requires the government to steer the economy towards “net zero” by 2050. If that goal is to be reached, they calculate, all British airports except Glasgow and Heathrow must be shut down by 2030, and probably those two as well by 2050—and only then, if new technologies and masses of renewable electricity have come onstream, could some reopening begin.

A final example is EVs. With such products we should ask: are they the lynchpin of a green transition, or are they a new commodity designed to keep the wheels of accumulation spinning, to ensure that every driver keeps on carrying two tons of metals and plastics everywhere they go, while governments keep on marginalizing alternatives that reduce demand for travel or expand public transport and cycle lanes? And what are EVs powered by? Batteries, from lithium.

Again, do the math. If the world’s vehicle fleet were replaced by EVs, the planet’s lithium reserves would all be mined out and/or seabed mining would lay waste to the oceans. Much of this activity reproduces relations of extractivist imperialism. Look for instance at Germany’s lithium-grab in Bolivia. The tech fetishists will say in response, “Lithium was only discovered as a chemical for batteries in the 1990s. In ten years time, there’ll be a new one discovered.” Maybe. But we can’t bet the future of the planet on this kind of speculation.

These are points on which eco-socialists and degrowthers should be in unison. The approach requires an emphasis on “shutting down” in the rich countries as much as on “building anew.” Of course, there’s an urgent need for more electricity connections and safe water in the Global South—and, in the North, too—to lift millions out of poverty. Some sectors obviously must grow. But in the high energy-using nations, there also has to be a near-complete shut-down of aviation, as well as beef, and far lower use of cars and energy in general.

One can find some perverse inspiration in the wartime United States. “Perverse” in that any serious degrowth or eco-socialist program must be anti-militaristic. I’m thinking, rather, on the lines that Mike Davis lays out in his essay “Home-Front Ecology.” Davis recounts how U.S. daily life was transformed during the Second World War. Cars were ditched for bicycles, people tore up concrete in their yards and planted vegetables. Nowadays you could imagine agro-ecology transforming the suburbs. The U.S. lawn, for example. At present, it’s a monoculture kept lifeless by herbicides and pesticides. Instead, garden it, allow life to thrive, plant fruit trees and flowers, and in the process we’ll transform our relationship to nature. More labor would be required, but a great deal of food would be produced—and locally, without the need for transport, preservatives, and so on. This requires less “technology,” in the usual sense of the term.

High-tech firms like Bayer—the producer of Roundup—would see profits dive. But it would develop what Marxists call the “productive forces.” These center not on “technology” per se, but on human knowledge and capacities. Scale up the example of the suburban lawn and we can imagine industrial

agriculture replaced by agroecology and agroforestry, a transformation that would dramatically mitigate climate change, increase the supply, diversity and resilience of crops, and in general begin to overcome the “antithesis between town and country.” Books such as Braiding Sweetgrass are full of suggestions as to how our relationship to the natural world could be revolutionized.

PF: I want to close on eco-socialist strategy. Tempest interviewed David Camfield, author of Future on Fire, earlier this year. David, I think correctly stressed the importance of mass movements and struggle to win the economic and societal changes needed to address global heating. You have questioned a predominant current in radical degrowth politics, localism—a focus on cooperatives, municipal reforms, and mutual aid. How do you see degrowth goals relating to the challenges of building mass struggle and movements, and confronting state power?

GD: To clarify, I wasn't presenting a full-on critique of localism in the Spectre essay. As you've seen from my comments on gardens and horticulture, any eco-socialist transition would involve localization of production particularly in foodstuffs. My critique, rather, is of those who, although sharply critical of the tendencies of labor unions and social democrats to conform to the requirements of the system, give a free pass to degrowth politics in its municipalist and cooperative forms. But here, too, just as in unions, the challenge is to engage in ways that can build mass movements that can open up ways to break beyond existing structures.

Just as Green New Dealers can learn from the degrowth movement, degrowthers should place greater emphasis on class struggle. The “growth” they abhor is structural, endemic to a system ruled by a class of tycoons who also happen to be gluttonous consumers. We're in an era of widespread anti-systemic consciousness, but anti-systemic struggle will only gain real momentum if it can gather together “traditional” workers' action over wages and conditions together with struggles against oppression and war, and for democratization, the environment, and so on.

So for example in my workplace right now, a university, I'm taking part in a union fight over pay and conditions but am also involved with a group of colleagues who are pressing management to take action on sustainability issues. We proposed—successfully—that where the university pays for our travel to conferences, it should insist that we use ground transportation rather than air, at least for short-haul distances. The point is, we should be doing more to collectively define what human need looks like in the age of climate breakdown. Too often, consumption questions are seen dichotomously: moralistic guilt-tripping versus simple demands for “more.” The latter is conflated by some Marxists with Marx's cherishing of humanity's ever-expanding needs, but the two are not the same. What is sometimes thought of as Marx's Prometheanism is, ultimately, a belief in the ability of the human species to collectively define and keep redefining its own “species being,” including its relationship to the environment. This belief in the ability of humanity to radically redefine itself is perfectly compatible with the degrowth movement, at least on its left flank. In fact, in the age of climate breakdown, species survival will depend on that redefinition.

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P.S.

• Tempest. 6 August 2023:

<https://www.tempestmag.org/2023/08/the-politics-of-degrowth/>