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The Future is Degrowth, Not Apocalypse

Degrowth is not the crisis; capitalism is.
— Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan (2022, 21)

In our age of division and climate crisis, apocalypse can be read into many texts. Intentionally, unintentionally, or even by its deliberate rejection, these ends of days set the agenda. *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism* is an example of the third on this list. This book focuses on the toxic culture of capitalism and anthropogenic climate change, but strains to avoid the apocalypse; both as an aesthetic, and as an outcome from our growth-based trajectory. There are other books for the looming, karmic dread of contemporary collapse. Instead, Andrea Vetter, Matthias Schmelzer, and Aaron Vansintjan take the next step of presenting tangible solutions to the material and cultural problems that define our transformative era.

The Future is Degrowth is a substantial reworking of a previous German version by Vetter and Schmelzer, published in 2019 under the title *Degrowth/Postwachstum zur Einführung*. This amended version, the authors explain, has been substantially updated and is written for an international (English-speaking) audience. The authors have managed a three-part account of history, critiques of growth, and non-apocalyptic pathways away from our pressing present. The book is written as a reference point for discussing growth and degrowth amongst the English-speaking Left. It gives degrowth a constructive rather than destructive agenda, aimed at including lived struggles like rent and housing, care work, and everyday extractivism, breaking the book's own academic confines with a focus on doing.

The strategy and namesake of the book, degrowth, is presented as a holistic, multifaceted process combining economic transition with social

justice. Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan situate themselves in critical theory. Their work is less of a thought piece and more of an actionable manifesto. Indeed, *The Future is Degrowth* can be summarised as an argument for how a just transition from late-stage petro-capitalism is a real possibility. Eco-Marxism is used to demonstrate this chance, and its basis in existing scholarship. According to the authors, Eco-Marxism highlights the "material and ecological basis of any social system, and the way by which social metabolism fosters or disrupts natural cycles and metabolic exchanges, contributing to the dynamics of capitalist crisis" (Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan 2022, 85). With references not only to Marx but figures like Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci, the authors' revolutionary precedents are not shied away from.

Readers new to degrowth are introduced to a menagerie of new terms, which both splash extra colour into the authors' arguments and reveal more of the background they are writing from. Three important examples are conviviality, social metabolism, and nowtopias. Conviviality is historically entwined with degrowth and refers to the art and practice of living together. Social metabolism is a Marxist concept referring to the flows of materials and energy between nature and society, and how these flows are governed and reproduced. Nowtopias are societal aims or outcomes which are adaptable and achievable. These examples illustrate how the book's theory reflects the authors' goals for enacting widespread social and material transformation, and how transformation is not limited to explicit apocalypticism.

Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan warn that "existing power structures shape even our visions of overcoming them" (2022, 180); reminding us that transformation itself is not neutral. They warn of technological solutions "indulging in the euphoria of expert-led planning, presenting utopia as a blueprint" (2022, 180) especially when it lacks the adaptability and achievability to make it a nowtopia. The choice to focus on the adaptable and achievable also explains the authors' choice to avoid the 'a' word, which is invisible in the same way a storm cloud is to those seeking shelter underneath it. In a way, we are beyond discussing apocalypse. We are living it.

Assumptions of a destructive apocalypse seem to frustrate the authors. They are hesitant to indulge in apocalyptic, collapse-premised language. The authors even call the fixation with environmental catastrophe "misanthropic" (2022, 175). This is significant because the authors do, however, envisage and advocate for widescale, transformative action. The aesthetic of destruction is avoided on the justification that it is nihilistic and disempowering. 'Apocalypse' is thus reduced to meaning an existential or spiritual disaster. This is interesting, as its broader meaning as a revelation,

transformation, and rebirth actually describes the authors' intentions well. *The Future is Degrowth* is an example of authors drawing from apocalypticism while avoiding its more overt tropes, in the attempt to make it more palatable for a practice-oriented audience.

The distinction between societal degrowth and societal collapse is central to the book. To make this distinction clear, Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan work to change degrowth's reputation as a stoked recession or policy of austerity. Degrowth is promoted as democratising, decentralising, feminist, anti-colonialist, and anti-racist. These priorities recentre the metrics of the economy (and society more broadly) on human needs rather than GDP growth. But *The Future is Degrowth* does not mislead readers into thinking there does not need to be a difficult rebirth in the global North. The loss of thoughtless consumption, connectivity, and global power is part of the (apocalyptic) revelation. This comes from a moral duty to the people of the global South, for whom climate crisis is a well-established, lived reality. In other words, we need more than solar panels. We need to transform how our lives are lived and organised.

The book's argument for transformation begins with the chapter "Economic growth," which explains how our measurements of progress and growth are products of recent history. "Critiques of growth" addresses the arguments which frame degrowth as anti-modern, privileged, and apolitical. "Degrowth visions" explains different versions of degrowth. "Pathways to degrowth" gives policy recommendations at the political level, while "Making degrowth real" promotes linking organised movements at the social level. Finally, "The future of degrowth" raises areas the authors see as underdeveloped in degrowth discourse. The authors discuss problems with power imbalances and overly privileged framings of degrowth which alienate marginalised groups. Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan also call out a trend of vagueness in how degrowth can be organised and carried out in a democratic way, which must be explicit for the equitable degrowth advocated in the book.

The Future is Degrowth is written as though degrowth is a term familiar to the reader. The authors' job then, is to connect this familiarity with social justice and free it from any of the mistaken, misled, or incomplete versions of degrowth that are emerging. Throughout the book the authors reverse critiques against degrowth in a way that is almost formulaic. One example reads "[d]egrowth is not against progress; rather, holding on to continuous economic growth undermines real progress" (2022, 22). The authors maintain the same humanist ideals as their critics. It is degrowth, they argue, that best upholds these ideals in our uncertain, changing future.

The authors describe a struggle taking place over degrowth, about who it serves, and the need for these humanistic ideals for degrowth to maintain its integrity. Defining and enacting degrowth is treated like a spiritual conflict over justice in our systems of consumption. This sought-after justice is simultaneously framed as social and ecological. *The Future is Degrowth* warns against a pretender disrupting this message in a way which, perhaps unintentionally, resembles the figure of the apocalyptic Antichrist in the Bible. This threat of a degrowth pretender is expressed as something to anticipate for the future, and a present danger today. Eco-fascism and the Far-Right are named as these pretenders or "contaminants" (2022, 76), because they separate social from ecological justice and thus stray from good degrowth. The pretender motif helps cement the relationship between *The Future is Degrowth* and eschatology.

The degrowth presented by the authors is a future-oriented call to action which is similar, yet distinct from its more 'misanthropic' colleagues, including deep adaptation (Bendell and Read 2021) and collapsology (Servigne and Stevens 2020). *The Future is Degrowth* combines academic style with occasionally irreverent language. The book functions both as a scholarly reference and an approachable introduction to social and ecological justice for the twenty-first century. This is significant as it reflects a core concern of the authors: that degrowth cannot be discussed within academia alone and should be part of a broader public discourse. As part of this concern, the authors are forthright about their claims and sources, and direct further reading through recommendations such as *Doughnut Economics* (2017) by Kate Raworth. The *Future is Degrowth* goes beyond a critique of growth by making its alternative palatable and inclusive.

> [A] critique of growth is not in itself forward-thinking. And indeed, it is possible that such a proposal may eventually be embraced by conservative governments that acknowledge impending ecological breakdown and a changed economic reality but that take advantage of this moment to maintain, and deepen, social hierarchies (2022, 171).

As the authors explain, they are writing for an oncoming future where our ecological challenges may heighten social hierarchies. Overpopulation is an example that catalyses controversy. The *Future of Degrowth* argues population control is the Far-Right and eco-fascist pretender corrupting degrowth. Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan explain how population control is a racist, anti-feminist expression of colonial North-South inequality and not a useful strategy for reducing CO_2. It is fear from wealthy countries mobilised against poorer ones, despite immense disparity between

which countries pollute most. The authors seek to distance degrowth, or at least their version of degrowth, from these suggested controls. In this way, the authors are grappling for degrowth's soul. *The Future of Degrowth* at its core is the constructing of a degrowth canon and popular front to prepare readers for these kinds of debate. This isolates what the authors see as fascist attempts to absorb degrowth and remove the justice which makes good degrowth possible.

Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan discuss the near omnipresence of growth in our economic, political, and social systems. The authors' self-awareness borders on self-critique, as they hold themselves to account for their privileged relationship to degrowth. The way the authors characterise "growth subjects" is particularly significant. This term refers to how we are subjects in a growth paradigm, and are expected to idealise individualism, status, and personal assertiveness (2022, 111). Unlike apocalypse, a growth subject has no account of renewal. The authors brilliantly implicate academia and authorship in this paradigm. They point at the expectation to grow output, grow readership, grow expertise, and grow influence, and to do so from the finite resources of your time and energy. If you (inevitably) fall behind or experience burnout, this is treated as a failure. In other words, the problems of the growth paradigm are not just material, but cultural.

Further expanding our cultural awareness of degrowth, the authors summarise four common sources of growth critique from outside the degrowth movement. These are: C*onservative critiques of growth*, G*reen fascism*, A*nti-modernism*, and *Environmentalism of the rich*. Like the four horsemen, these movements differ from one another but, together and in our time of climate crisis, can be read as apocalyptic. These are the competitors to a socially just degrowth as degrowth goes mainstream. Combined with recurring topics like the green new deal, this book is written for our specific moment in history. This makes *The Future is Degrowth* both an important reading today, a significant snapshot of historical value, and a product of a larger eco-leftist political context.

Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan pre-empt many criticisms of degrowth, both pragmatic and scholarly. In an example of the latter, the historical boogeymen Thomas Malthus—an eighteenth-century philosopher associated with the overpopulation debate—is raised and argued to be specifically not part of the degrowth agenda (2022, 129). Once again, potential critiques are inverted as the authors argue that it is in fact Malthus and his followers that are stuck in the mindset of growth. The authors make these arguments with urgency. *The Future is Degrowth*'s topic of existential survival, expressed through action-oriented critical theory, and

without the energy release valve of explicit apocalypticism, has left an important impression on the book's style. The authors demonstrate the arguments for degrowth with the tenacity and energy of a live debate.

The authors have written a practical, ideological guidebook. They have earnestly tried to create something that may be considered non-apocalyptic, or even anti-apocalyptic by their understanding of the term. Indeed, they succeed in separating themselves from the catastrophism and nihilistic clichés of traditional apocalypticism. However, the need for a practical guide for manoeuvring mass change and ideological divisions is itself alarming and resonates with our current sense of upheaval. Maybe *The Future is Degrowth* has something in common with the post-apocalyptic, where revelations of the end times have already been revealed. The esoteric has been succeeded by the material. Climate change is no longer a portent of the future, but a process underway. This book is not a warning. It is about what parts of today should survive into tomorrow.

Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan walk a scholarly field which is akin to a tightrope, falling neither into the disaster zeitgeist on their Left or the hands-off non-committal slogans on their Right. The socio-material failures of our capitalist system are well defined in *The Future is Degrowth*, and so are the solutions. While it will take the reassembling of our social world, the authors maintain a commitment to significant, measurable, difficult, action, precluding nihilistic pessimism or techno-solution optimism. Whether we call it apocalyptic or not, this is the planned, recentring upheaval being advocated for.

The book is a ferry into the theory of degrowth; not as easy as a bridge, but worth it if taken with a good pilot at the helm. Leftist scholars wanting to familiarise themselves with degrowth would be in their element with *The Future is Degrowth*. Teachers and lecturers among us could raise many of its ideas in the classroom, and all readers could consider their own relationship to the growth paradigm being critiqued. For those who already overlap social justice with a break from models of linear growth, *The Future is Degrowth* will be familiar. Its greatest strength is as a popular signal that the sanctity of growth is tarnishing, and that advocating apocalyptic change does not require a flippant aesthetic of destruction:

> Degrowth is not a blueprint that needs to be followed. Rather, it is an invitation, a broad set of principles and ideas, a path whose twists and turns have yet to be taken. We hope that we have convinced you that degrowth is not just a good, timely, and necessary idea, but one that could, in fact, really work (2022, 283).

As the authors explain, *The Future is Degrowth* makes no attempt at overhauling post-capitalist thought or presenting a one-size fits all blueprint. They do, however, present post-capitalism through an actionable narrative. Incorporating social justice and repoliticising degrowth helps bring the concept out of academia and into the public. An actionable degrowth is underscored by framing it as a process with multiple priorities and structures. It is not a single goal to be started and then finished with. Like apocalypse, in a way, degrowth is simultaneously final and cyclical, future and past.

For a book that does not consistently mention societal collapse until the penultimate chapter, there are key concerns in apocalyptic discourse throughout *The Future is Degrowth*. Revelations and transformation are almost assumed, while collapse from the climate crisis is treated like a choice instead of an inevitability. Other theorists may disagree, but to Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan there is a clear danger in overemphasising a doomist position, or using doomist language. Unequal consequences from the climate crisis, with our growth fixation as the culprit, are the target for something other than apocalyptic theory. If you will allow me to say, I believe *The Future is Degrowth* is a book about apocalyptic practice. In the time to come, and already, we might see a lot more from this nexus of apocalyptic practice and climate change.

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