Degrowth and the global South
A timely discourse on ecologically sustainable development in an unequal world

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Motivation

- Degrowth as an academic and activist movement questioning the fundamentals of our economic system

- Historically it is movement from the Global North, most likely for the Global North

- Global justice arguments made regularly, especially w.r.t. post-colonial and post-development topics

- But what is the role of the Global South in this movement? Inspiration? Actor? Ally? Object?

- What would degrowth (wherever implemented) mean for the Global South?
Key preparatory results

• This paper extends previous work* on how the academic degrowth movement takes into account the role of the Global South

• Using a qualitative and quantitative literature review, we found **two kinds of concentrations** in the existing literature:
  - **Substantial** dimension: focus on synergies between degrowth and Southern positions; challenges regularly mentioned but not analysed
  - **Methodological** dimension: focus on (non-formal) theoretical papers, among empirical research strong focus on qualitative work

• Key issue: the **twin problem of structural dependency**:
  - Structural dependencies at the same time **motivations for and potential obstacles to** degrowth policies

Goal of the present contribution

- In this paper we aim to answer the following complementary questions:

  **To what extent does the academic degrowth discourse refer to institutionalist contributions?**

  **How could institutionalism complement the discourse on the topic of degrowth and global inequality?**

- *Note: we did not study how institutionalism could benefit (intellectually) from an exchange with the degrowth literature*
Outline of the present talk

I. Describe the sample representing the academic degrowth discourse

II. Discuss the extent the degrowth discourse refers to institutionalist work

III. Make some suggestions for future collaborative work
Step 1:
Get a literature sample
We obtained an initial sample from the Web of Science. Focus on journal publications in ranked outlets → academic degrowth discourse ≠ degrowth movement.

We searched the following keyword combination in the article title, abstract, author keywords:

"Degrowth" OR "de-growth" OR "post-growth" OR "decoissance"

"Global North" OR "Global South"
OR
"decolonial*" OR "unequal exchange" OR extractiv*
OR
"Dependency theor*" OR "structuralis*" OR "post development" OR "post-development"
OR
Global OR international

Only kept original articles and reviews, basically only English works. → its the focus on peer-reviewed journals that excludes many non-English-written work.
The literature sample

Title, abstract and keyword screening in the Web of Science database
- 218 papers retrieved

Abstract screening
- 216 papers screened

Full text screening
- 46 papers screened

2 duplicates ('corrections') excluded
170 papers excluded

Preliminary set of relevant papers
- 16 papers

Preliminary set of core papers
- 30 papers
The literature sample

Preliminary set of relevant papers

16 papers

Preliminary set of core papers

30 papers

Most cited references of core and relevant papers:

- ≥ 5 citations from core papers OR
- ≥ 10 citations from relevant papers

18 publications screened

Final set of relevant publications

24 papers

Final set of core publications

32 papers
General core sample characteristics

Number of publications per year

A) Institutional origins (core sample)

B) Number of authors (core sample)

A young and (still) concentrated discourse

More details on the sample, also: Gräbner-Radkowitsch & Strunk (2022)
Step 2: Extent of exchange
References to institutionalist outlets

• We searched the bibliography of all core and relevant contributions

• We searched for references to ‘typical’ outlets, e.g.:
  • American Journal of Economics and Sociology,
  • Forum of Social Economics
  • Journal of Economic Issues
  • Journal of Evolutionary Economics
  • Journal of Institutional Economics
  • …

• Overall result: reference to institutionalist outlets is moderate at best
## References to institutionalist outlets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant publications</th>
<th>Outlay</th>
<th>Citations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecological Economics</td>
<td>204</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journal of Cleaner Production</td>
<td>108</td>
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<td>Sustainability Science</td>
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<td>Degrowth: A vocabulary…</td>
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<td>AJES</td>
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<th>Core publications</th>
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<tr>
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Step 3: Future collaborations?
Room for collaboration

• Currently, there is **little consideration** of institutionalist work by the academic degrowth discourse

• Two dimensions in which the (young) degrowth discourse could benefit from the (mature) body of institutionalist work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substantive dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td>Degrowth discourse de-emphasizes potential challenges for the South due to degrowth in the North</td>
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<td>Reason: structural interdependencies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mentioned regularly, seldomly analysed</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Methodological dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strong focus on theory</td>
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<td>In empirical work, large majority of work qualitative and/or case study</td>
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<tr>
<td>We believe a greater plurality of tools is required → also quantitative and formal tools, rightly embedded</td>
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Possible contributions

• Role of institutions for societal transitions → progressive institutional change

• Co-evolution of institutions and technology to complement strong focus on social innovations

• A more balanced view on top-down and bottom-up effects → systemism
  • Also: comprehensive take on individual vs. systemic/policy changes

• Synthesising historical and theoretical work as in, e.g., Myrdal’s principle of circular cumulative causation

• Self-reflected blend of formal models and institutional theory of dependence
  • Example: Gerdes et al. (2022)’ agent-based model on how changes in national and global institutions can address unequal exchange relationships
Summary & Conclusion
Summary and conclusion

- Degrowth as a relatively new movement from the Global North, with many topical and methodological affinities to institutionalism
- Topical focus: consideration of the Global South in the degrowth literature
- Current literature shows a number of **concentrations**:
  - **Topical**: focus on synergies between North and South, rather than challenges
  - **Methodological**: focus on theory, if empirical then qualitative case studies
- References to institutionalist work could address the resulting blank spots
- For the moment, the reference to institutionalist literature is very small

Implications for institutionalist scholars?
Summary and conclusion

- Degrowth as a relatively new movement from the Global North, with many topical and methodological affinities to institutionalism

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**Implications for institutionalist scholars?**
Appendix
More details on the sample
Two narratives

- We conduct a **qualitative content analysis** of the core sample
- Shows that each paper can be associated with one of two main narratives:

**Synergies**
- Stresses commonalities among South and North perspectives

**Challenges**
- Discusses challenges for, or because of degrowth w.r.t. the North-South relation

![Main narratives of core papers chart]

- 68.8% (n=22) Synergies
- 31.2% (n=10) Challenges
Two narratives
Central (sub-)arguments

- Within the two narratives we identified three sub-arguments:

**Synergies**
1. Southern thought and movements as inspiration and allies
2. Degrowth in the North as decolonisation of the South
3. Growth dependence is problematic not only in the North, but also in the South

**Challenges**
1. Degrowth as an unsuitable concept in terms of framing and theory
2. The danger of neocolonial agenda-setting
3. Material challenges for the South as a consequence of degrowth in the North

- Synergies papers often deal with two or three arguments...
- ...challenges papers usually focus on one single challenge
- Many papers reference literature on decolonialism and post-development
Two narratives
Narratives and their methodology

- We then studied the methodological orientation of the papers:

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A) Main methodologies of core papers

- **50%** (n=16) - Quantitative
- **21.9%** (n=7) - Mixed Methods
- **18.8%** (n=6) - Case Study
- **3.1%** (n=1) - Qualitative
- **6.2%** (n=2) - Theoretical

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Two narratives
Narratives and their methodology

- We then studied the methodological orientation of the papers:

  B) Narratives and their methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synergies</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45.5% (n=10)</td>
<td>60% (n=6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>18.2% (n=4)</td>
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<td>27.3% (n=6)</td>
<td>10% (n=1)</td>
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<td>4.5% (n=1)</td>
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- There were only two formal models in the complete sample
- Among empirical papers, strong focus on qualitative research