

Which way to grow

Gareth Dale considers two routes out of the climate crisis

Movements demanding action on the climate crisis are growing. The emphasis is on action. Questions of strategy are less clearly defined. But some platforms are exciting discussion, most prominently of degrowth and the Green New Deal.

Degrowth draws on traditions of anarchist and socialist utopian community building (phalanstery). Its pioneers are the back-to-the-landers who work the land, or the city dwellers cultivating urban gardens.

The Green New Deal is a flag around which different projects form. Some businesses and political parties look to state-led infrastructure projects. Labour unions campaign for green jobs. For the far left it represents a historic opportunity to wrest reforms from capitalism until the ensuing contradictions reveal spaces beyond. In each case there's a dominant complex. For the Green New Deal: social democracy. For degrowthers: narodnism, the 19th-century peasant-oriented movement of Russian intellectuals.

We've seen some spiky back-and-forth between Green New Deal supporters and degrowthers. In his essay 'Ecological Politics for the Working Class', Matt T. Huber of Syracuse University accuses degrowthers of advocating "a politics of less". They can't "speak to the needs of the vast majority of workers ravaged by neoliberal austerity". Further, he maintains, they recoil from "any hint of industrial technology".

Science journalist Leigh Phillips presses similar buttons, *ad absurdum*. Degrowth and austerity, he declares, are "mathematically and socially identical". Against austerity/degrowth, he intones the mantra of modernity: "Energy is freedom! Growth is freedom!" To counter climate change, he demands "a massive worldwide build out" of nuclear power.

In response, degrowthers diagnose Huber and Phillips as suffering from technological hubris, lacking understanding of economic-environmental constraints, and failing to appreciate the blowback potential of their techno-fixes.

Phillips' claim that nuclear power is the safest of all energy sources and emits no CO₂ is risible. It's belied by the tens of thousands of deaths due to Chernobyl alone, and omits the fact that making reactor fuel requires enormous energy inputs.

What of the other charges? All but one miss their mark.

First, Huber's characterisation of degrowth as a politics of 'less' is specious. Degrowth offers, rather, a politics of 'less is more': a smaller overall materials and energy envelope, with differentiated contents.

For the rich, this means much *much* less. For the frequent flyers and beef guzzlers: cease and desist! For the billions: more good food, better housing, abundant clean water, reliable electricity, efficient sanitation, quality public amenities, and less hierarchy.

All this requires infrastructure transformations, with "industrial technology" in abundance. Many degrowthers campaign for wind farms, with their reinforced concrete and steel towers, magnetic direct-drive turbines, and nano-engineered polymers and composites. They demand stupendous investments in transforming energy and transport systems.

Why does this matter? The current conjuncture is remarkably 'stable-unstable'. At face value, global capitalism is secure, with little threat from below. Yet by its own yardstick growth (success) is diminishing. And due to capital's logics of wealth polarisation and expanding cycles of production that crunch the Earth's biophysical limits, perceptions of crisis are pervasive.

The Green New Deal and degrowth communities seek alliances with sections of capital, but on the left of each the perspective is to fan movement flames to the point where they can begin to overcome the institutions of power. The strategy of Green New Deal leftists is to build strength among workers' and social movements pushing for major state reform programmes, while working toward socialist goals in the longer run.

What of the degrowth narodniks? What just transition programmes would they discuss with, say, the Kentucky miners who are blocking coal trains to demand back pay? On the surface, the view does not seem promising. From the phalanstery window, workers' jobs and housing can appear distant.

Yet there are three resources in the degrowth tradition that enable constructive engagement. One is the commitment to powerful unions, which are central to campaigns for reductions in the working week.

Another is the commitment to self-organisation. This is a mainstay of authors in the degrowth canon, such as Ramachandra Guha. Guha's work on the Chipko peasants who hugged trees to prevent commercial logging demonstrated that the environmentalism of peasants,