

LESS FOR LENT

GIVE UP CAPITALISM FOR 40 DAYS

7. Who We Are Now: New Possibilities

If you have not already done so, it's important you read the introductory blog [here](#).

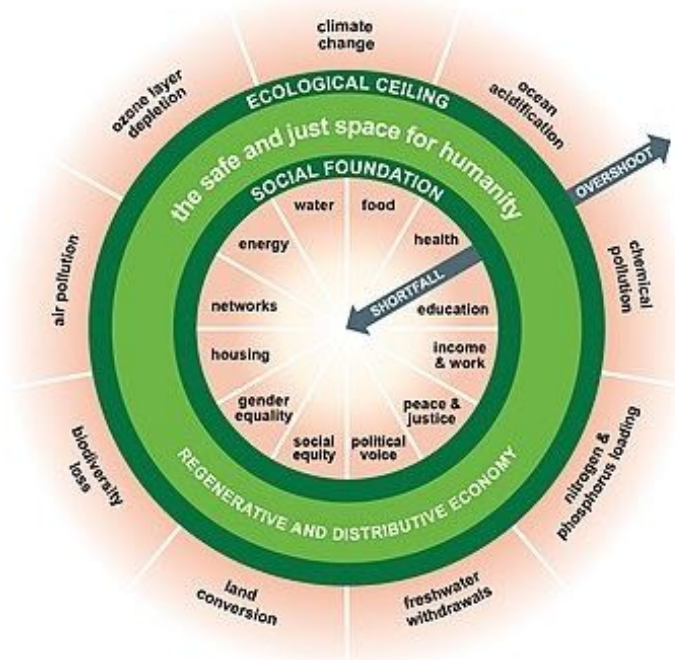
“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.” (Arundhati Roy, [‘The pandemic is a portal’](#))

During the course of LESS for LENT, the whole world has changed through the covid-19 pandemic and its impact on our lives, work and economic systems. With each crisis comes an opportunity, and instead of rebuilding a broken system, we now have an opportunity to demand and co-create one that's fit for purpose. In Week 7's learnings, we will look at some ideas for systemic change, with a focus on Degrowth.

Where does the pandemic leave us? The economic fallout looks to be one of the most severe in several decades and generations. In the past two weeks alone, a record [10 million Americans applied for unemployment benefits](#) and [nearly one million people in the UK applied for Universal Credit](#) – a tenfold rise from usual figures.

In moments like these, we become hyper-aware that we are deeply steeped in a fast-flowing river of unfolding global events that we may have previously felt shielded from, depending on our relative position of power and privilege. There is no going back - nor should there be - the impact on all of our lives will be substantial, and we need to adapt to the post-covid world while protecting especially those who are hardest hit.

“Our society is changing rapidly and our economy is next. Thousands of small businesses will not survive. The new forms of solidarity and mutual aid that we're building now will be needed for when this is “over” and the era of mass unemployment returns.” (Mike Small, [‘Home’](#))



The rupture with the old, caused by a global pandemic that brings with it unimaginable suffering, is something we did not choose. What we can choose is our response to it. Rather than struggling to return to ‘normal’ for a wealthy few, we might choose to use this crisis to build new structures in which basic needs are met for the many - we might anchor ourselves in degrowth.

Unprecedented times bring with them unprecedented opportunities – for example, the [planned introduction of Universal Basic Income in Spain as a permanent structural instrument](#) would have previously been hard to imagine. And [the City of Amsterdam’s plans to frame city development through ‘Doughnut Economics’](#), Kate Raworth’s framework (see graphic - [source: Wikimedia](#)) to facilitate thriving according to people’s needs

without exceeding ecological limits, have been in the pipeline for a while, but have now become a tool to rebuild the city’s economy after the pandemic.

The Degrowth movement has developed many ideas that are useful tools in these times. Degrowth is not the same as economic recession [or the crisis in which we now find ourselves](#). Degrowth refers to a planned, democratic downscaling of production and consumption that prioritises human well-being and equity and enhances the integrity of ecological systems. While there is a wide spectrum of political positions and priorities, proponents of Degrowth argue for alternative models of organising society and the economy around questions of what could be a good life for all.

The following themes serve to give an overview of some of the principal debates in the evolving Degrowth discourse – they are not an exhaustive list.

1. Decoupling, degrowth and a circular economy

Decoupling assumes that it is possible for economies to be able to grow without corresponding environmental harmful pressures. It is advocated by proponents of green growth such as many versions of a Green New Deal. Degrowth proponents argue that “not only is there no empirical evidence supporting the existence of a decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressures on anywhere near the scale needed to deal with environmental breakdown, but also ... such decoupling appears unlikely to happen in the future” ([European Environmental Bureau](#)).

Instead, ecological, sociopolitical and historical factors all set limits to growth. Principles of equity and circularity steer us away from treating humans and more-than-human nature as disposable. A circular economy would be waste-free by design, by ‘closing the loops’ of production and consumption. In an equitable economy, the basic needs of everyone are valued equally. No-one is treated as disposable, only valued as cheap labour to maintain the lifestyles of the wealthy

2. Alternative economic indicators, wellbeing and human needs

Many studies have suggested that at a certain level [further economic growth does not lead to any more well-being, but rather decreases it](#) - called the Easterlin Paradox. Furthermore, [GDP does not capture wealth and income disparities and pollution](#), and is therefore inadequate in measuring to what extent societies are genuinely thriving. Critics of the GDP have formulated alternative indicators to determine economic success, based on human wellbeing. Such alternative indicators are determined by research around human needs, mental and physical health, and subjective (reported) and objective (statistical factors such as mortality rates) aspects of wellbeing. A range of [indicators has been developed](#), including the Gross National Happiness and the Genuine Progress Indicator.

Human needs describe the basic building blocks of subjective and objective wellbeing, drawing upon insights from psychology. Influential models have been Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs or the [human needs](#) or human-scale development developed by Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef in 1986: subsistence, protection, affection, participation, understanding, leisure, creation, identity and freedom (this is covered more in depth in the reading for [Week 1 of Less for Lent](#)).

3. Degrowth in practice: global justice and appropriate technologies

A just framework for Degrowth takes historical relationships around dominance and exploitation from colonialism and imperialism into account. It follows that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to Degrowth, and historical and geographical dimensions must be approached through non-oppressive frameworks and sensitivities.

In the global North, Degrowth would take the shape of decreasing production and consumption, and the discourse tends to revolve around critiques of affluent lifestyles that cannot be afforded or aspired to. This does not mean that everything has to de-grow. Rather, a downscaling of particular industries (such as the military-industrial complex, publicity, consumer electronics and other toys) would be accompanied by a growth in industries that support public welfare (the care sector, hospitals, repair shops, slow food, slow fashion, upcycled items and so on).

In the global South, there will be some overlap with the global North among wealthy elites. In the majority world however, Degrowth takes the shape of post-development discourses, arguing that even new 'softer' forms of development constitute a form of cultural imperialism. Degrowth alternatives may involve indigenous ways of organising social life and livelihoods according to the good of the community, for example through [Buen Vivir](#) ('the good life'), a concept emerging from Ecuador, the inclusive [community planning toolkit Plan de Vida](#) (Life plan) of the Colombian Misak people. It might also take the shape of feminist, anti-corporate activism, such as Vandana Shiva's farming and seed saving project [Navdanya in Uttarakhand, North India](#).

Across the global North and South, new technologies for Degrowth will involve appropriate technologies are small in scale, affordable, localised, decentralised, labour-intensive, repairable and energy-efficient. E.F. Schumacher's motto 'small is beautiful' became the guiding slogan of the appropriate technology movement from the 1970s. Such technologies often operate according to open source principles, critiquing copyright law and aiming to ensure replicability and fair usage rights – as in [the appropedia project](#).

Anchoring Ourselves in Degrowth in Scotland

Let's return to digging where we stand - what are the main issues for degrowth in Scotland? Although the degrowth movement is strongest in continental Europe, it is gaining traction in Scotland - from organisations like the [Wellbeing Economy Alliance](#) and Enough! to emerging reading groups and events. [The Scottish Degrowth Commission](#) is looking for fresh ideas to focus on equity and securing livelihoods in the pandemic's economic fall-out.

As we are plunged into the depths of a global economic downturn, we can choose how we adapt to the post-covid world. Our neoliberal overlords will call for stimulating production and consumption on steroids following the crash. Rather than being carried away in a renewed surge of the growth narrative, we can anchor ourselves in a different economic paradigm.

We have choices to make. We can choose to [bail out airlines](#) and other fossil fuel-heavy industries - what Naomi Klein aptly called "[coronavirus capitalism](#)". Or we can shift resources towards the sectors needed in a just transition towards a degrowth economy - prioritising the health and care services that we have clapped for, as well as food security, appropriate technologies and small businesses that follow principles of a circular economy. We can follow the radical experiments now being tried elsewhere.

How can we anchor ourselves in degrowth in a post-covid world?

We'd like to hear your thoughts and reflections – send us your words, images, poems at info@enough.scot or tweet them using the hashtag #DegrowthAnchor



Optional resources :

Degrowth Media Library: <https://www.degrowth.info/en/library/>

['Degrowth and our Post-Covid Future'](#) by Mike Small, on the Enough! blog

["Wachstumsrücknahme", "Postwachstum", "Entwachsen"? An introduction to concepts and approaches of the German degrowth movement](#) by Matthias Schmelzer

[Degrowth: from theory to practice](#) by Filka Sekulova et al.