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## DEGROWTH – A WAY OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

**Summary.** Degrowth concept has been widely discussed for the last years. It has been wrongly reduced to an unproductive movement which aim is only to change the system of GDP measurement. Degrowth is much more than changing GDP with another indicator. It is a strong reaction to the consequences of globalization; to what can be described by Jean Baudrillard's words as "violence of global", when even human rights circulate exactly like any other global product (oil or capital). The aim of the paper is to present Degrowth as a complex concept that calls for social and economic transformation of society, for changing the politics of perpetual growth, political action, reduction of consumption, and environmental protection. As Georgios Kallis argues it is a way how to live better with less. The key question is what forms of democratic society and democratic institutions can make the degrowth transition possible.

**Keywords:** globalization, sustainability, degrowth, economy, environment, social transformation.

## DEGROWTH – SPOSÓB TRANSFORMACJI SPOŁECZNEJ

**Streszczenie.** Koncepcja Degrowth została szeroko omówiona w ciągu ostatnich lat, a także niesłusznie ograniczona do bezproduktywnego ruchu, którego celem jest tylko zmiana systemu pomiaru PKB. Degrowth jest czymś więcej niż tylko zastąpieniem PKB innym wskaźnikiem. Jest to silna reakcja na skutki globalizacji; na to, co można opisać słowami Jeana Baudrillarda jako "przemoc globalna", kiedy nawet prawa człowieka krążą dokładnie tak samo jak każdy inny produkt globalny (olej lub kapitał). Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie Degrowth jako złożonej koncepcji, która wymaga transformacji społecznej i ekonomicznej społeczeństwa, zmiany polityki ciągłego wzrostu gospodarczego, politycznego działania, zmniejszenia konsumpcji, a także ochrony środowiska. Jak przekonuje Georgios Kallis, jest to sposób, jak lepiej żyć zużywając mniej. Kluczową kwestią jest to, co formy społeczeństwa demokratycznego i demokratycznych instytucji mogą zrobić, aby przejście w Degrowth stało się możliwe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** globalizacja, zrównoważenie, Degrowth, gospodarka, środowisko, transformacja społeczna.

## Introduction

We live in a society where demand for global perpetual growth has become an idea that affects all areas of human life. The negative impact of globalization has been widely described. As an answer to the negative consequences of globalization and idea of growth (and consumption, especially in industrialised countries), sustainable paradigm emerged in the late 1980s with the aim “to provide a framework through which economic growth, social welfare and environmental protection”<sup>1</sup> should be harmonized. However, since then we have reached a point where even sustainable paradigm has been misused in the name of growth, but with different tools. Baker notices that “there is much focus in public discussion on issues of sustainability, and mainstream versions of development tend routinely to attach the adjective ‘sustainable’ to it in ways that have largely become meaningless”<sup>2</sup>. Kallis, Kothari or Dale argue that through the idea of green industrial revolution and developing green economy sustainable development has been transformed again into idea of capitalistic growth<sup>3</sup>. The growth paradigm “is indeed largely accepted in advanced and developing countries alike as an unquestioned imperative and naturalized need”<sup>4</sup>. Swyngedouw writes, that “the public management of things and people is hegemonically articulated around a naturalization of the need of economic growth and capitalism as the only reasonable and possible form of organization of socio-natural metabolism.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Asara V., Otero I., Demaria F., Corbera E.: Socially sustainable degrowth as a social-ecological transformation: repoliticizing sustainability. In: *Sustainability Science, Special Feature: Editorial Socially Sustainable Degrowth As A Social-Ecological Transformation*, July 2015, Volume 10, Issue 3, p. 376.

<sup>2</sup> Baker S.: *Sustainable Development*. Routledge, London 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See Kallis G.: The Degrowth Alternative. In: *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, February. Available online on [www.emeraldinsight.com](http://www.emeraldinsight.com); Kothari et al.: Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the Green Economy. In: *Development 57*, 2015, p. 362-375; Dale G. et al.: *Green growth: ideology, political economy and the alternatives*. Zed Books, London.

<sup>4</sup> Asara V., Otero I., Demaria F., Corbera E.: Socially sustainable degrowth as a social-ecological transformation: repoliticizing sustainability. In: *Sustainability Science, Special Feature: Editorial Socially Sustainable Degrowth As A Social-Ecological Transformation*, July 2015, Volume 10, Issue 3, p. 376.

<sup>5</sup> Swyngedouw E.: Depoliticization (‘the political’). In: D’Alisa G., Demaria F., Kallis G. (eds.) *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*. Routledge, London 2014, p. 91.

## Degrowth as complex concept

The concept of degrowth is a response to economic, social and environmental crisis and has been developed through the last decades as an alternative to sustainable growth. Degrowth “aims to open up the democratic discussion of selective downscaling of man-made capital and of the institutions needed for such prosperous way down”<sup>6</sup>. Its proponents see it as a possible way of transition from unsustainable society to sustainable society. The ongoing discussion on degrowth that has raised the topics of globalization, capitalism, market-based economy, growth, sustainability among various experts including social philosophers, social critiques, ecological economists, economists, politicians and many others can be described as more or less emotional, optimistic and rationalistic as well. They stress key factors, key issues, and give arguments pros and con degrowth. The question is what forms of democratic society and democratic institutions can make the degrowth transition possible. Mouffe asks in what kind of society (and sustainability) we want to live and to open up alternative avenues<sup>7</sup>. We can ask if degrowth is possible in the current socio-economic system. Fotopoulos is one of the authors who sees degrowth and degrowth market-based economy as non-feasible within a system of market economy. According him the growth economy is “identical with the market economy” and is “the inevitable outcome of the dynamics of the market economy, but de-growth deprives from its basic dynamic on the production side and also it deprives from its justification in the eyes of citizens, who, today, have been transformed into consumers”<sup>8</sup>. He gives the explanation that “economic growth is just the main symptom of a catastrophic (economically, socially and ecologically) system of allocating resources, and not the cause of it. The cause is the market system itself”<sup>9</sup> and states that “the ultimate cause of the chronic economic crisis is the growing concentration of economic power in fewer and fewer hands, an event that results in a huge and growing concentration of income and wealth.”<sup>10</sup>

Degrowth is seen as a complex concept that involves economy, philosophy, social and political ecology, ecological economy, social theories, policy and environmental theories. In recent years it “has made strides in the consolidation of a cogent research program through international conferences and journals involving universities, grants, and teaching and through creation of research networks, chiefly in Europe; for degrowth, research is an important part

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<sup>6</sup> Asara V., Otero I., Demaria F., Corbera E.: Socially sustainable degrowth as a social-ecological transformation: repoliticizing sustainability. In: Sustainability Science, Special Feature: Editorial Socially Sustainable Degrowth as a Social-Ecological Transformation, July 2015, Volume 10, Issue 3, p. 377.

<sup>7</sup> Mouffe C.: *On the political*. Routledge, London 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Fotopoulos T.: De-growth, the Simpler way and Inclusive Democracy. In: *International Journal of Inclusive Democracy* 6 (4), 2010, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

of the movements<sup>11</sup>. The history of using the term *décroissance* (degrowth) goes back to the discussion among the French intellectuals in the 1970s and is connected with work of Georgescu-Roegen<sup>12</sup> as well as Bosquet and Gorza in 1972. It is also connected with social environmental movement and usually referred as activists-led science<sup>13</sup>. We can talk about different conceptual roots of degrowth (see works of e.g. Flipo, Demaria, Bayon or Cecchi).

After the international colloquium „Défaire le développement Refaire le monde“ on sustainable degrowth which was held in Paris in 2002 at the UNESCO degrowth became a part of academic discussions and mainstream debate in newspapers and media. Latouche, one of the leading figures of the French degrowth identifies this colloquium as a birth of the degrowth movement.<sup>14</sup> The first Degrowth conference „Economic degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity“ was held in Paris in 2008 and opened the agenda for international scientific research. Schneider defines degrowth as “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term”<sup>15</sup>. More complex definition of degrowth is in the *Degrowth Declaration of the Paris 2008 conference*:

*“We define degrowth as a voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society... The objectives of degrowth are to meet basic human needs and ensure a high quality of life, while reducing the ecological impact of the global economy to a sustainable level, equitably distributed between nations... Once right sizing has been achieved through the process of degrowth, the aim should be to maintain a ‘steady state economy’ with a relatively stable, mildly fluctuating level of consumption.”*<sup>16</sup>

Van den Bergh in his article *Environment versus growth – A criticism of “degrowth” and a plea for “a-growth”* identifies five main interpretations of degrowth: 1. GDP degrowth, 2. Consumption degrowth, 3. Work-time degrowth, 4. Radical degrowth and 5. Physical degrowth.<sup>17</sup> O’Neill writes that he does not see any reasons “that degrowth cannot imply several things, so long, as they are not contradictory”<sup>18</sup>. Ott formulates four *forms of degrowth*: 1. degrowth encompasses a general critique of GDP as a measure for well-being

<sup>11</sup> Escobar A.: Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: a preliminary conversation. Special Feature: Review Article Socially Sustainable Degrowth as a Social-Ecological Transformation. *Sustainability Science*, July 2015, Volume 10, Issue 3, Springer, p. 457.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> See Demaria F., Schneider F., Sekulova F., Martinez-Alier J.: What is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement. In: *Environmental Values* 22, 2013, The White Horse Press.

<sup>14</sup> See Muraca B.: Decroissance. A Project for a Radical Transformation of Society. In: *Environmental Values* 22, 2013, The White Horse Press, p. 147-169.

<sup>15</sup> Schneider F., Kallis G., Martinez-Alier J.: Crisis or opportunity? Economic degrowth for social equity and ecological sustainability. In: *Journal of Cleaner Production* 18, 2010, Elsevier, p. 512.

<sup>16</sup> *Degrowth Declaration of the Paris 2008 conference*. In: *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Volume 18, Issue 6, April 2010, p. 524.

<sup>17</sup> Van den Bergh, J.C.J.M.: Environment versus growth – A criticism of “degrowth” and a plea for “a-growth”. In: *Ecological Economics* 70, 2011, Elsevier, p. 881.

<sup>18</sup> O’Neill D.: Measuring progress in the degrowth transition to a steady state economy. In: *Ecological Economics* 84, 2012, p. 221.

and pleads for alternative indicators<sup>19</sup>, 2. degrowth emerges from the sustainability discourse and follows the path of strong sustainability<sup>20</sup>, 3. degrowth emerges from an anthropological and social critique of growth. This approach follows the tradition of eudaimonia (the good human life) and performs a strategy of non-compliance with established patterns of behaviour<sup>21</sup>, 4. degrowth is seen as an integral part of an overall strategy to transform and eventually replace capitalistic models of production and distribution by other models<sup>22</sup>.

Petridis writes about the *means of transformation* that are referred as *degrowth strategies* and uses Demaria description: 1. oppositional activism (direct action by civil society that can slow down unsustainable paths and raise awareness), 2. building solidarity economy alternatives (nowtopias), creating new institutions outside of present ones (cohousing projects, producer-consumer cooperatives, open source technologies, non-monetary exchange systems, ecovillages etc.), 3. reform current institutions to create conditions for societal transformation: this can be seen as a part of so called *degrowth paradox*. We cannot escape that degrowth emerge from current, capitalistic, system (various environmental policies, social policies and economic proposals).<sup>23</sup>

## The general aims of degrowth concept

Degrowth concept is very rich in theory and transformations include radically new social imaginery<sup>24</sup> and extensive institutional transformations<sup>25</sup>. Opponents tend to reduce degrowth to talks about changing GDP, describing it as an unproductive, unrealistic, inefficient and even as a threat to democracy and prosperity of human society. It is much more than talking about changing GDP with another indicator. The objective is to increase social justice and ecological sustainability. Kallis declares that “both the name and the theory of degrowth aim explicitly to repoliticize environmentalism... Ecologizing society is not about implementing an alternative, better, or greener development. It is about imagining and enacting alternative visions to modern-growth based development... Degrowth involves a rethinking of the society signalled by terms such as limits, care, and *dépense*... To be successful, the transition

<sup>19</sup> Ott K.: Variants of de-growth and deliberative democracy: A habermasian proposal. In: Futures 44, 2012, p. 573.

<sup>20</sup> See Ott K., Muraca B., Baatz C.: Strong sustainability as a frame for sustainability communication. In: Godemann J., Michelsen G. (eds.): Sustainability Communication, p. 13-26. Springer, Berlin 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Ott K.: Variants of de-growth and deliberative democracy: A habermasian proposal. In: Futures 44, 2012, p. 574.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 574.

<sup>23</sup> Petridis P.: Potentials of the debate on de-growth for socio-ecological transformation and climate change policy. Report prepared for the JPI CLIMATE project “TRAFORVIEW”, 7 October 2013., p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> For social imaginery as the source of degrowth see works of Castoriadis.

<sup>25</sup> See Johanisova N., Crabtree T., Fraňková E.: Social enterprises and non-market capitals: a path to degrowth? In: *Journal of Cleaner Production* 38, p. 7-16.

to degrowth must be global”<sup>26</sup>. Kallis argues that “economic growth in the Global South threatens alternative, non-monetized means of livelihood, generating the poverty that, in turn, makes more growth ‘necessary’. Degrowth in the Global North can provide space for the flourishing of alternative cosmovisions and practices in the South, such as *buen vivir* in Latin America or *ubuntu* in Africa. These are alternatives to development, not alternative forms of development”<sup>27</sup>. It has to be distinguished between unsustainable degrowth, that is economic recessions<sup>28</sup>, that deteriorate social conditions, negative growth of GDP or just shrinking of material production and consumption, and sustainable degrowth.

Daly speaks in his article *Economics for a Full World* about the way of transformation from empty world to full world and describes how the limiting factors have changed. He states that “we now live in a full world, but we still behave as if it were empty... The prevailing obsession with economic growth puts us on the path to ecological collapse, sacrificing the very sustenance of our well-being and survival. To reverse this ominous trajectory, we must transition toward a steady-state economy focused on qualitative development, as opposed to quantitative growth, and the interdependence of the human economy and global ecosphere.”<sup>29</sup>

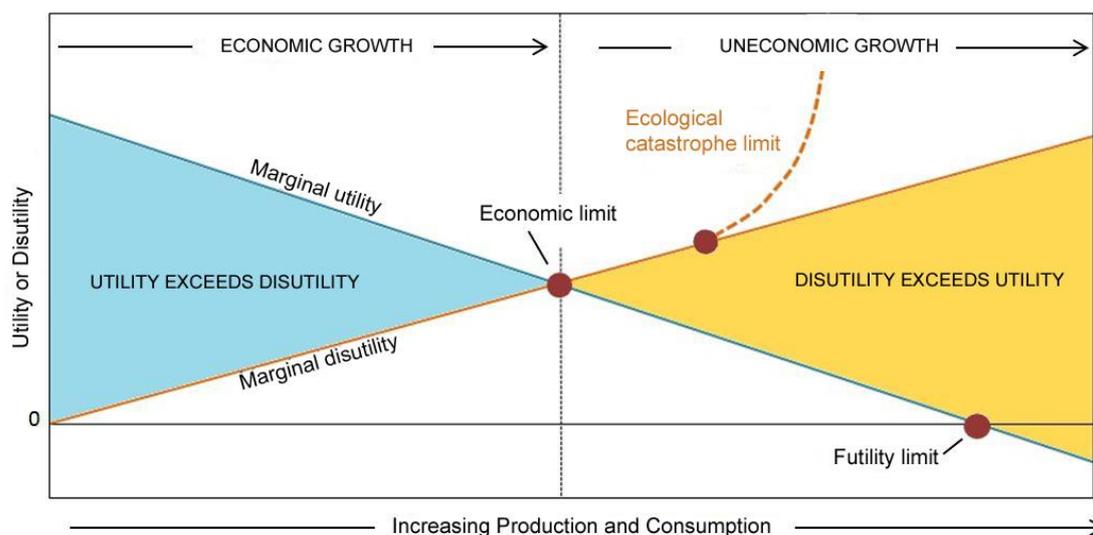


Fig. 1. The declining marginal benefit of growth of the economy and the increasing marginal cost of the resulting environmental sacrifice.

Rys. 1. Malejące marginalne korzyści ze wzrostu gospodarczego i rosnące koszty końcowe powstałe z poświęcenia środowiska

Source: <http://www.greattransition.org/publication/economics-for-a-full-world#sthash.o93Sv3Mk.dpuf>

<sup>26</sup> See Kallis G.: *The Degrowth Alternative*. Great Transitions Initiative Viewpoint, 2015, p. 1-3. [http://www.greattransition.org/images/GTI\\_publications/Kallis-The-Degrowth-Alternative.pdf](http://www.greattransition.org/images/GTI_publications/Kallis-The-Degrowth-Alternative.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Schneider et al.: *Crisis or opportunity? Economic degrowth for social equity and ecological sustainability*. In: *Journal of Cleaner Production* 18, 2010, Elsevier. p. 512.

<sup>29</sup> Daly H.: *Economics for a Full World*. Great transition initiative. Toward a transformative vision and praxis. June 2015, p. 1. [http://www.greattransition.org/images/GTI\\_publications/Kallis-The-Degrowth-Alternative.pdf](http://www.greattransition.org/images/GTI_publications/Kallis-The-Degrowth-Alternative.pdf)

Daly explains that from the diagram we can distinguish three concepts of limits to growth:

1. “The *futility limit* occurs when the marginal utility of production falls to zero. Even with no cost of production, there is a limit to how much we can consume and still enjoy it. In a world with considerable poverty, and in which the poor observe the very rich still enjoying their extra wealth, many view this futility limit as far away, not only for the poor, but for everyone.
2. The *ecological catastrophe limit* is represented by a sharp increase to the vertical of the marginal cost curve. The leading candidate for the catastrophe limit at present is runaway climate change inducted by greenhouse gases emitted in pursuit of economic growth.
3. The *economic limit* is defined by the quality of marginal costs and marginal benefit and the corresponding maximization of benefit.

From the graph, it is evident that increasing aggregate production and consumption is rightly called economic growth only up to the economic limit. Beyond that point, it becomes uneconomic growth because it increases costs by more than benefits, making us poorer, not richer.”<sup>30</sup>

Petridis, using the ideas of Kallis, Latouche and Trainer, describes the objects and aims of transformation as “the current (western) consumer-capitalist societies, including their institutional structure and associated value system, i. e. the current capitalist (growth) social imaginary and the domination of economism in all spheres of social life. Growth is considered integral to this system. ‘It is not that this society has a growth economy, it is that this is a growth society’<sup>31</sup>. It is exactly this growth society that forms the object of a degrowth transformation”<sup>32</sup>.

Who are the subjects of transformation? “The role of individuals, civil society and the state is considered more important and there is generally less faith in market policies and reforms... Towns, suburbs and neighbourhoods are usually considered as more suitable starting points... including those struggling for environmental justice in the Global South, and peripheral North.”<sup>33</sup>

Demaria argues that despite integrating bioeconomics and ecological macroeconomics, degrowth is a noneconomic project.<sup>34</sup> He summarises the general goals of degrowth as 1. reduction of energy and material throughput, 2. attempt to challenge the omnipresence of market-based relations in society and the growth based-roots of the social imaginary replacing them by the idea of frugal abundance, 3. call for deeper democracy, 4. equitable redistribution of wealth within and across the Global North and South, as well as between present and future generations.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Daly H.: *Economics for a Full World*. Great transition initiative. Toward a transformative vision and praxis. June 2015, p. 6-7. [http://www.greattransition.org/images/GTI\\_publications/Kallis-The-Degrowth-Alternative.pdf](http://www.greattransition.org/images/GTI_publications/Kallis-The-Degrowth-Alternative.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Trainer T.: Degrowth: Do you realise what it means? In: *Futures* 44 (6), 2012, p. 593.

<sup>32</sup> Petridis P.: Potentials of the debate on de-growth for socio-ecological transformation and climate change policy. Report prepared for the JPI CLIMATE project “TRAFORVIEW”, 7 October 2013., p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Demaria F., Schneider F., Sekulova F. Martinez-Alier J.: What is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement. In: *Environmental Values* 22, 2013, The White Horse Press, p. 209.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

## Conclusion

Kirby writes that sustainability is in question and points out that the discussion about sustainable development “is dominated by a techno-scientific discourse about curbing emissions, switching to renewable energy, developing low-carbon buildings, agricultural production and transport options, ‘greening’ industrial production processes and protecting biodiversity. Little or no attention is focused on the models of development that structure our production and distribution systems (both industrial and agricultural), inform our energy systems, stimulate our consumption patterns, and provide society with the imaginaries that legitimate the present structure. Therefore, discussion of alternatives is largely limited to reforms within the current capitalist model of economy and society so that the questions raised by the various dimensions of today’s global crisis – the financial/economic and the social, as well as the environmental – for the sustainability of capitalism tend not to be asked. This is partly because the various dimensions are seen as discrete and separate crises rather than manifestations of a paradigmatic crisis, a crisis of the capitalist model itself.”<sup>36</sup>

The debate on growth limits and on forms of capitalism and globalization has been going on for many years. Degrowth is much more radical project with the aim to transform and eventually replace capitalistic models of production and distribution by other models, as we mentioned above. It calls for repoliticizing environmentalism into a new political project, not individual environmental policies<sup>37</sup>. Kallis defines it simply as a way how to live better with less. The key question remains the same: what forms of democratic society and democratic institutions can make the degrowth transition possible. However, there are many arguments against degrowth theory and its implementation in real life of society, but we have to admit that there are ecological limits of growth, that we have to cope with the environmental problems and climate changes caused by all industrial activities. Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and Jeremy Rifkin and Ted Howard raised the question of the entropic nature of the economic process. Jean Baudrillard talks about the ‘violence of global’, when even human rights circulate exactly like any other global product (oil or capital). In this sense Fournier describes tyranny of economic growth. Degrowth involves radical transformation on multiple levels and multiple systems from local, regional, national to international. The role of the state is to facilitate transformation through the implementation non-reformist reforms, involving markets, states and civil society<sup>38</sup>. There is not one answer how to deal with all problems human society has to face. Degrowth transformation goes beyond all capitalism patterns and

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<sup>36</sup> Kirby P.: Transforming capitalism: the triple crisis. In: *Irish Journal of Sociology* November 2013, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> See Kallis G.: In defence of growth. In: *Ecological Economics* 70 (5), p. 879.

<sup>38</sup> See press article by G. Kallis entitled „Yes, we can prosper without growth“. Available online on [www.degrowth.org/yes-we-can-prosper-without-growth](http://www.degrowth.org/yes-we-can-prosper-without-growth)

the task if it is possible to transform the society, the economic and social systems and move on from academic debates into practical life is still open for future.

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## Omówienie

Koncepcja Degrowth została szeroko omówiona w ciągu ostatnich lat, a także niesłusznie ograniczona do bezproduktywnego ruchu, którego celem jest tylko zmiana systemu pomiaru PKB. Degrowth jest czymś więcej niż tylko zastąpieniem PKB innym wskaźnikiem. Jest to silna reakcja na skutki globalizacji; na to, co można opisać słowami Jeana Baudrillarda jako "przemoc globalna", kiedy nawet prawa człowieka krążą dokładnie tak samo, jak każdy inny produkt globalny (olej lub kapitał). Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie Degrowth jako złożonej koncepcji, która wymaga transformacji społecznej i ekonomicznej społeczeństwa, zmiany polityki ciągłego wzrostu gospodarczego, politycznego działania, zmniejszenia konsumpcji, a także ochrony środowiska. Jak przekonuje Georgios Kallis, jest to sposób, jak lepiej żyć zużywając mniej. Kluczową kwestią jest to, co formy społeczeństwa demokratycznego i demokratycznych instytucji mogą zrobić, aby przejście w Degrowth stało się możliwe.