

## **The Degrowth Spectrum: Convergence and Divergence within a Diverse and Conflictual Alliance**

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*Abstract:* The call for ‘sustainable Degrowth’ has recently turned into a focal point of critical social and ecological debates, as well as a frame for diverse strands of activism. So far, little is known about motives, attitudes and practices of grassroots activists within the Degrowth spectrum. The article presents results of a questionnaire survey conducted at the 2014 International Degrowth Conference, revealing both the presence of a widely shared basic consensus among respondents and a broad division into five distinguishable subcurrents. A cluster analysis shows that Degrowth provides a frame for a conflictual diversity of critical and transformational approaches. We identify and describe five such currents: The eco-radical *Sufficiency-oriented Critics of Civilization*, the moderate *Immanent Reformers*, a transitory group of *Voluntarist-Pacifist Idealists*, the *Modernist Rationalist Left* and the *Alternative Practical Left*.

*Keywords:* Degrowth; social and environmental movements; transformation; economic growth; activism

In September 2014, the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity took place in Leipzig, Germany.<sup>1</sup> Attracting more than 3.000 participants, it was by far the largest meeting of the international Degrowth community to

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date. For four days, people gathered in Leipzig University for a host of lectures, workshops, open space sessions, practical courses, artistic performances and much more – all in all, the programme comprised over 400 events – as well as for an experience in conviviality including participatory cooking, self-organised private hosting and camping, and a closing demonstration that ended with a protest action at a local coal power plant. With this event, the debate about economic Degrowth, hitherto a predominantly Southern European phenomenon, has finally taken hold in Northern Europe, exhibiting in the process some signs of evolving into an actual social movement (Brand, 2014; Schmelzer/Eversberg, forthcoming).

Indeed, criticism of economic growth seems once again *en vogue*, both in academic and political discourse and as a field of social and environmental activism. Around and beyond the five International Degrowth Conferences to date, academic writing on Degrowth has multiplied, numerous smaller events have taken place, and even some specialized think tanks and research clusters have sprung up. Simultaneously, practitioners and activists have linked Degrowth ideas to practical projects and experiments from urban gardening to eco-communities, as well as to coordinated actions and struggles such as the ‘Ende Gelände’ anti-coal protests in Germany.

Over the course of these events, it has become commonplace to speak of ‘the Degrowth movement’, implying ‘Degrowth’ to be not just another slogan and an issue for academic and political debate, but a focal point of broader social mobilisation (Demaria et al., 2013; Kallis et al., 2014; Muraca, 2013; Cattaneo et al., 2012). However, whether this label is justified remains contested, since hardly any sociological research on Degrowth as a community, spectrum, or movement exists so far. Beyond some small-scale empirical case studies (Cattaneo and Gavalda, 2010; Burkhart, 2015), the current state of knowledge is limited to detailed accounts of the intellectual origins and genealogy of Degrowth thinking (Muraca, 2013; more generally D’Alisa et al., 2014) and efforts to distinguish subcurrents of the

Degrowth or post-growth debates. For example, Schmelzer (2015) identifies five currents within German post-growth discourse: Conservative, social-reformist, sufficiency-oriented, anti-capitalist, and feminist (see also Adler, 2016).

While these systematizations provide an overview of the discursive landscape, little is known about the attitudes and practices of people that associate with Degrowth by participating in projects or actions, reading Degrowth literature, or attending Degrowth events. What common views do 'grassroots Degrowthers' share, what aspects of growth do they criticize, what types of alternatives, transformational strategies and alliances do they prefer? Are there similar subcurrents and ideological divisions at this level of the Degrowth spectrum as the ones we know from the scholarly debate? Is it, then, actually justified to speak of a Degrowth movement?

It is these questions that we want to address in this article, drawing on the results of a questionnaire survey conducted at the Leipzig conference. To identify relevant commonalities and differences in the worldviews and value systems of the 814 respondents, we analyze their responses given on a series of 29 statements about growth, Degrowth, and related topics. We find that the Degrowth spectrum is united by a basic consensus resting on two main pillars: The insistence that economic growth as such is destructive, requiring a reduction of the level of material wealth in the Global North, and the demand that this be achieved in a peaceful, democratic and generally emancipatory manner. Next to this, different currents among Degrowth advocates and sympathizers exist, among which tensions and disagreements persist. We identify five currents: *Sufficiency-Oriented Critics of Civilization*, *Immanent Reformers*, *Voluntarist-Pacifist Idealists*, the *Modernist-Rationalist Left*, and the *Alternative Practical Left*.

We proceed as follows: After introducing our survey and the basic theoretical framework we depart from (2), we outline the basic consensus among respondents (3). The main section (4) presents the results of our cluster analysis and provides descriptions of the five subcurrents identified, in terms of expressed stances and attitudes, social composition and typical practices. The conclusion (5) relates our findings to the questions raised in the introduction.

## 2. Data and concepts

The data used for the analyses presented in the following sections are from a questionnaire survey conducted by the Jena research group on “Post-Growth Societies” at the International Degrowth Conference, 2-6 September 2014 in Leipzig. Our four-page standardized questionnaire included questions on participants’ social characteristics, everyday practices, social and political activism, and a series of 29 statements<sup>2</sup> that respondents were asked to rate by ticking one of five boxes on a scale from “completely disagree” to “completely agree” (or a “don’t know/can’t say” option).

In order to avoid an active selection bias, the questionnaire was handed out to all participants in an equal fashion, namely along with the conference programme at the local registration desks. German speakers received German-language questionnaires, others an English version. Questionnaires could be returned to collection boxes positioned in central locations on the conference premises, or by completing an on-line version, which was additionally available in Spanish and could also be filled out after the conference. In order to raise the participation rate and reduce the self-selection bias unavoidable in such a setting, participants were reminded on several occasions (in the lunch queue, during plenary sessions)

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<sup>2</sup> For the full wording of all statements, see Table 1.

to complete their questionnaires. In total, 814 were returned, amounting to about 27% of overall conference attendance.<sup>3</sup>

A comparison with available data on all registered participants for some key attributes (gender, nationality, country they arrived from) does not suggest strong distortions in the sample (Eversberg, 2015). Still, caution is advised concerning its representativeness for the totality of conference participants, and much more so for 'the Degrowth spectrum' as a whole. This is due in particular to the astonishingly high level of education reported: Roughly two thirds stated they held an academic degree, and a majority of the remaining third were currently university students. The conference's attendance definitely had a strong bias in this direction, but this might still be somewhat exaggerated in the sample due to self-selection. Conceivably, participants with no academic-level education and a stronger interest in practical aspects of Degrowth may have been less inclined to complete a lengthy and demanding questionnaire, possibly leading to an underrepresentation of this group. Despite this caveat, the results provide a clear enough picture both of some broadly shared core beliefs and of the field's internal divisions and disagreements. We assume that the *range* of views present in the spectrum is by and large accurately and exhaustively captured by the results, while doubts remain justified about the relative *strength* of the different currents we identify in Section 4.

Table 1 lists all 29 statements from the questionnaire, as well as the average responses and absolute numbers of those that agreed or disagreed. Since 3 marks a neutral position, average rates substantially above 3.0 indicate broad agreement, whereas values notably below 3.0 indicate majority opposition.

*[Insert Table 1 here]*

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<sup>3</sup> 685 respondents lived in Germany, 129 in other countries. For more details on the survey and structure of the sample, see Eversberg 2015.

Another aspect that merits explanation is our choice of terms for describing our object, a choice closely related both to the theoretical concept that stands behind it and the decision to use the whole sample as the basis for our analyses. In speaking of the 'Degrowth *spectrum*', we opt for a term that does not necessary imply much social cohesion and institutionalization, conceiving of the object as a relatively open, loosely bounded space of relations.<sup>4</sup> This, indeed, corresponds with our basic theoretical vision of the subject, which conceives of the shared social space occupied by Degrowth thinkers and activists as a *field* in the Bourdieuan sense: A 'structured space of forces and struggles' encompassing a multitude of heterogeneous social agents and structured – like a magnetic field – by invisible lines of force that can only indirectly be read off from the orientations or 'position-takings' of those affected by it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 243, 86; Bourdieu, 1996). In this sense, 'Degrowth' is a code word condensing in a single phrase the complex web of ideas, motivations, and relationships at play in the heterogeneous and dynamic social process that the conference was a culmination point of. We would indeed assume too much if we simply posited that everyone attending the conference was part of a Degrowth 'movement'. Speaking of a 'spectrum' allows for much broader variation of degrees of involvement with Degrowth – not necessarily as a discourse or idea in the narrow sense, but as a loosely bounded space of practices with a broadly similar orientation.

This claim is not purely theoretically motivated: It is evidenced by the *basic consensus* we will outline in the next section, a baseline common understanding shared by an overwhelming majority of respondents. In Bourdieu's words, broadly agreeing to this consensus indicates that one shares the '*illusio*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98) of the field: Its 'sense of the

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<sup>4</sup> In earlier versions of this article, we used the term 'movement'. Due to many critical comments – including by the anonymous reviewers – we rethought this, settling instead for the more open term 'Degrowth spectrum'.

game’ and the belief that its practices are worth partaking in. Respondents sharing the belief that societies dependent on endless economic growth are unsustainable and that finding a peaceful and non-authoritarian path to a post-growth society is worth struggling for (see Section 3) can be said to be subject to the *field effect* of Degrowth: The issues addressed are in some way relevant to what they think and do, regardless of whether they consider themselves part of a ‘Degrowth movement’ or not. Still, this conception also allows us to discern the limits of said field within our sample: Individuals or groups rejecting the basic consensus cannot be deemed part of the field, since the field effect does not extend to them. In the present context, this may apply for instance to invited speakers or to delegates from broadly sympathizing organizations who attended the conference because of an invitation or for reasons of political strategy.

Speaking of the ‘Degrowth spectrum’ and defining it as a field includes all respondents as an initial hypothesis only: Part of the analytical work is to specify which groups cannot – or only partly – be considered part of said spectrum. However, our approach is to identify these *post-hoc*, according to the results of the multivariate analyses, rather than by excluding parts of the sample *a priori*. For instance, we would have excluded far too many respondents prematurely if we had limited ourselves to the 43% of respondents who ticked ‘yes, the Degrowth movement’ as an answer to the question what social movements they felt affiliated with.<sup>5</sup> In fact, a comparison of this group with the remaining 60% shows only minor

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, our interpretation of the distinction between five subcurrents elaborated on below suggests that a positive answer to this question is more an indication of an individual’s readiness to identify with movements or their mobilizing slogans in general than of her relation to Degrowth. Others who prefer to refrain from such ready identification are often in fact much more in line with the basic tenets of Degrowth thinking and the personal practice it suggests.

differences between both subgroups, and self-declared Degrowth adherents make up substantial shares of all of the five subcurrents we identify in Section 4.6

### 3. The basic consensus of the Degrowth spectrum

In a first step, we focus on those statements that were clearly and uniformly affirmed or rejected (with a mean deviating from 3 by .8 or more, meaning that under 100 respondents opposed the majority view). These seven statements (Figure 1) reveal a shared basic consensus, which rests on two pillars. The first is a fundamental critique of ‘sustainable growth’ or ‘green economy’ conceptions: An overwhelming majority believes that a ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ economy cannot be one whose output in goods and services, and with it its resource consumption and emissions, continues to expand. Accordingly, there was almost unanimous agreement that ‘growth without environmental destruction is an illusion’ and that ‘shrinkage will be inevitable’ in the industrialized world. Also, the prospect that European societies will have to ‘abstain from amenities’ is considered desirable or at least necessary by a large majority.

The second pillar presents the vision of a positive transformation as one that is critical of capitalism, pro-feminist, peaceful and bottom-up: It includes the statements on female emancipation, nonviolence, about change having to come from below and the rejection of the notion that opposing capitalism is pointless without a viable alternative.

*[Insert Fig. 1 here]*

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<sup>6</sup> The largest deviation of the mean answer among ‘Degrowth movement’ adherents from the overall mean is .21 standard deviations. Conventionally, only deviations above .3 SD are considered noteworthy. The fact that these small deviations are significant at (at least) a 5% level for 11 out of 29 statements indicates that this 40% subgroup does indeed exhibit some degree of internal coherence – albeit much less so than each of the five clusters presented below, and within an overall sample that it does not strongly stand out from.

As diverse as the motives for supporting or rejecting these statements may have been: This indicates a high degree of unanimity about crucial coordinates of degrowth thinking. It includes not only a deeply critical view of economic growth, but also strong statements on the necessity of reducing the size of the economy (even though we deliberately used the deterring term ‘shrinkage’ in this item) and of giving up on certain lifestyle privileges. While the second pillar of the consensus, which points to the *how* of the change aspired to (critical of capitalism, pro-feminist, peaceful, and bottom-up), seems to align the Degrowth spectrum with a broader segment of social reformist ideas and social movements (such as the *altermondialista* movement or parts of the environmental movements), the consensual rejection of the possibility of green growth and the demand for a reduction of economic activity markedly set it apart from other progressive streams of thought.

#### **4. Five currents within the Degrowth spectrum**

Cluster analysis is a proven multivariate statistical method for identifying groups of similar items or individuals in a dataset. Simply speaking, it sorts respondents into groups based on their similarities in terms of their responses to a number of questions. In our case, every respondent giving their opinions on the 29 statements thus produced a personal pattern of answers that can be expressed as a series of numbers encoding the boxes on the five-point scale they chose (from 1 for total disagreement to 5 for total agreement). A *k*-means cluster analysis – this is the specific variant we used – allows us to specify the number of clusters in advance. If, for instance, we ask for five clusters, it randomly picks five different individuals, takes their respective patterns as points of departure and assigns all others to the group built around the one of those five that is most similar to them. It then calculates the mean points of the five ‘clouds’ of respondents (which will be different from the random starting points), uses them as starting points for a renewed round of this assignment process, and repeats this

several times until the mean points remain stable, indicating that the groups now found are as clear-cut as possible in relation to each other, while being most homogeneous internally.

We calculated solutions for anything between two and eight groups, which we interpreted and discussed in detail – among ourselves and at a March 2015 workshop with Degrowth activists in Leipzig – before finally opting for the five-cluster solution as the best compromise between appropriate differentiation and necessary complexity reduction.<sup>7</sup> The five subgroups thus identified clearly differ from each other not only in terms of the views expressed, but also in their social composition as well as their reported everyday practices and activism.

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<sup>7</sup> In a cluster analysis, the significance of results does not provide an easy validity criterion. In this case, the values for cluster answers to each statement are invariably highly significant for the simple reason that the groups were constructed on the grounds of these variables. Alternative validation methods include the calculation of heterogeneity measures for the answers given on individual items and the exclusion of internal disputed items from the interpretation of cluster profiles (see the F values in Table 2), as well as the method of ‘cluster silhouettes’ (Everitt et al. 2011: 128–9). It must be noted here that, contrary to most uses of cluster analyses in the natural sciences or psychology, the kind of use we are making of it here is not based on a positivist philosophy of science but, in line with our use of the field concept, on a *relational* one (Bourdieu/Chamboredon/Passeron 1991: 33–55, 252–4). In such a context, validation of results is never a purely technical matter of test values or numerical criteria (Hennig 2002), but in the last instance always dependent on an assessment of the plausibility of different possible solutions. In the best case, this involves an intense personal familiarity with the empirical realities being studied, as well as the readiness to perform a twofold ‘epistemological rupture’ both with the seemingly natural preconceptions born of this familiarity and the seeming evidence of mathematical results as ‘facts’. This means that any analysis performed is not simply a technique to ‘reveal’ the ‘actual’ structure of the object of enquiry, but indeed an instrument used by the researcher as the scientific *subject* to *construct* that object. The choice of which cluster solution to prefer was therefore one that could not be made on the basis of statistical validity criteria alone. Indeed, any cluster solution highlights similarities and differences that are objectively present in the dataset – but whether these are of any importance for understanding the social forces at work within the field studied requires careful interpretive work and knowledgeable deliberation. Our discussion of seven possible solutions (2-8 clusters) among ourselves, and of three of these (4, 5 and 6 clusters) with a group of activists was one means of broadening this deliberation and achieving the rupture with the seeming objectivity of the mathematical results. It led us to eventually choose the five-cluster solution although the statistical criterion – the silhouette coefficient – slightly favored the 4-cluster solution.

[Insert Table 2 here]

*Table 2: Mean response patterns and degrees of heterogeneity for clusters 1-5*

In the following sections we provide condensed analyses of these five clusters. Each section starts with a description of the cluster's most distinct divergences from the sample average in terms of the responses given on the 29 statements. We then describe the cluster's characteristics in terms of social position, lifestyle, and political practices, and conclude with a contextualizing summary.

### **Cluster 1: Sufficiency-Oriented Critics of Civilization – ‘Peninsulae’ of parallel communities as nuclei of change**

The first current, encompassing 183 respondents (22%), is characterised by a particularly strong scepticism of modern civilization and a very radical ecological motivation. The following statements find much higher support among this group than on average: Almost two thirds advocate a return to the ‘lifestyles of previous generations’, 48% agree to the highly controversial statement that ‘Man should return to his (and her) natural place in the world’<sup>8</sup>, 43% support the demand for a far-reaching dismantling of the cities, and 45% want to ban long-haul flights for leisure purposes. More than 70% believe that ‘growth society has largely killed off people’s creativity’, almost 80% agree that individuals are personally responsible for the destructive consequences of their lifestyles and that a collapse of industrial civilization is imminent if nothing changes. More than 70% support the call to abolish the interest-based monetary system. Almost 60% agree to the voluntarist idea that only people’s ‘belief’ keeps the ‘madness of growth’ going. Furthermore, this cluster is the only one that tends to agree with the proposition that ‘climate change is the more pressing problem for the

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<sup>8</sup> Only 514 (63%) respondents answered this question at all – the highest rate of nonresponse for any item.

future of mankind than social inequality': One third agreed, 20% disagreed, and 40% gave a neutral answer.

In terms of its expressed beliefs, this cluster forms an extraordinarily homogeneous group which, when differentiating further up to eight clusters, consolidates into a hard core of about 130 people whose views converge more and more toward the pattern of radical ecological critique and scepticism toward civilization outlined here.

Respondents in this current are, at 38 on average, typically three years older than the mean respondent<sup>\*\*\*9</sup>. They have fewer academic degrees (57%<sup>\*\*</sup>), their parents have less frequently had tertiary education<sup>\*</sup>, and they more often speak only one language (15% compared to 9%<sup>\*\*</sup>) – all of which are likely to be age effects. Also, this cluster contains a relatively high proportion of respondents not originally from Germany (23% vs. 16%<sup>\*\*</sup>).

People in this current are more often vegans (14% vs. 9%<sup>\*\*</sup>), but also own cars more often than the average respondent (23% vs. 17%<sup>\*\*</sup>). They more rarely live in big cities<sup>\*</sup> and in rented property<sup>\*</sup>, while more often owning a house (11% vs. 6%<sup>\*\*</sup>).

In terms of activism, many people in this cluster identify with the Degrowth movement (55% vs. 43%<sup>\*\*\*</sup>), as well as with the environmental (67% vs. 55%<sup>\*\*\*</sup>), global justice (47% vs. 36%<sup>\*\*\*</sup>), and anti-nuclear movements (34% vs. 26%<sup>\*\*</sup>). Other social movements they frequently feel attached to are Transition Towns, anti-consumerism, climate justice, the women's, anti-war, and ecovillage movements, as well as permaculture. Membership is frequently reported in NGO's, especially in the ecological field, as well as in scientific associations or networks. The latter indicates that this group comprises many ecologically

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9 Stars indicate the level of significance for variables characterizing the clusters. Three stars indicate significance at .1% level (i.e. there is less than a one in 1000 probability that the reported association is due to chance), two stars at 1% level (less than one in 100), and one star at 5% level (less than one in 20).

minded scientists who spoke at the conference (fitting in with the high share of foreign respondents).

In summary, Cluster 1 appears as a grouping that incorporates many radical ecologist ‘movement veterans’ whose beliefs were shaped by the organizational forms and modes of this activism, partly going back to the 1970s and 1980s. Their fervently negative view of contemporary society as rotten to the core and ultimately doomed blends in with holistic ideas, a critique of alienation and, at times, certain regressive undertones. The radical turnaround they envision involves radical measures such as the dismantling of cities and bans on long-haul flights. Since they tend to consider industrial civilization as incapable of being reformed and destined to end anyway, their idea of activism focuses on building alternatives in small-scale local community projects, where the frugal modes of living necessary for the period after the collapse can be practically tested. This way of articulating theory and practice broadly conforms to the ‘parallel societies’ type described by Frank Adler (2016), bears remarkable similarities with the guiding ideas of ecovillages as described by Wallmeier (2015), and has a number of affinities with the *sufficiency-oriented* current of the post-growth discourse (Schmelzer, 2015; see also Burkhart, 2015).

### **Cluster 2: Immanent Reformers: Green growth or post-growth?**

The second cluster (155 respondents) is in some ways an antagonist to the first. Within the sample, it is clearly situated at the rationalist, relatively techno-optimist, and reformist – in terms of ‘thinking within existing institutional structures’ – pole. While Cluster 1 most uniformly affirms the ‘Degrowth consensus’ cited above, Cluster 2 tends to exhibit the greatest distance or scepticism toward it. Almost all statements making up the consensus are less fervently supported here than in the overall sample. In other words: The consensus,

although still shared by an internal majority, is not consensual, but indeed much more contested within Cluster 2.

Meanwhile, what constitutes its unity is a series of other typical attitudes: Firstly, almost two thirds reject the views that only people's belief keeps the 'madness of growth' going and that growth society has 'killed off people's creativity', while only 10% agree that humanity should return to its 'natural place in the world' (38% disagreed and 39% gave no answer). All of this points to a rationalist orientation that opposes esoteric thinking and wholesale critiques of civilization. Secondly, a clear distancing from conservative thought – supported by an overall majority – is endorsed by only 11%, suggesting that many in this cluster do not consider themselves political leftists. Thirdly, two thirds reject the idea of dismantling the cities (supported by less than 5%) and the call for a ban on long-haul flights for leisure. Considering the majority support (52%) for a positive view of technology as an important precondition for post-growth society and the relatively strong opposition against an orientation toward earlier generations' lifestyles (40% reject this, 24% support it), this seems to express a broadly optimistic view of technology and progress.

Fourthly, this current seems to promote a pragmatic and gradualist transformation within existing institutions: The view that the real problem is not growth itself, but its destructive effects, is affirmed by 69%, and a full 75% reject the statement 'Changing our everyday practice will not make the world a better place, since it does not question capitalism'. Most importantly, at 23%, the share of those viewing 'revolutionary change' as necessary is the lowest among all clusters. The rejection of the demand for a 'Degrowth party' by a majority of 53% contradicts this interpretation only at first sight, since many in this group may either believe that the issue is adequately addressed by existing parties, or do not consider Degrowth a desirable political objective at all.

In terms of social composition, males are overrepresented (51% vs. 43% in the sample\*). Reported everyday practices mirror the distance from fundamental critiques of progress and civilization: At 5.15\*\* flights within two years, *Immanent Reformers* are the most frequent-flying cluster, they travel more (15%\*, compared to 9% of the sample, have taken over 30 trips within a year), own smartphones more frequently (52% vs. 45%\*), and are more prone to eating meat (11%\* regularly, 48%\* occasionally) than the average.

At 25% (vs. 15%\*\*\*), a relatively big portion of this cluster does not identify with any social movement, particularly the global justice (22%\*\*\*) and Degrowth movements (34%\*\*) are comparatively rarely named. As ‘other movements’, plural economics and Transition Towns are the most frequent mentions, followed by ‘sustainability’ and anti-war movements. Relatively few *Immanent Reformers* reported having recently taken part in Direct Actions (6% vs. 13%\*\*) or demonstrations (48% vs. 64%\*\*\*). Many are members in student initiatives (25% vs. 17%\*\*) and parties (17% vs. 11%\*), while few have joined alternative-economy projects (11% vs. 17%\*) or trade unions (6% vs. 10%\*). Other memberships they name are mainly in ecological groups and initiatives such as food sharing or local agenda groups.

In sum, this group’s common features are a matter-of-fact rationalism, a relatively optimistic stance on technology and progress and a pragmatic take on politics. Their views and organizational affiliations largely match those of the ‘social reformist’ current of post-growth discourse (Schmelzer, 2015). While most tend to articulate the consensual positions of the Degrowth spectrum in a more moderate form, others seem to reject these, adhering instead to visions of ‘green’ or ‘sustainable growth’. Their transformational intentions are only weakly reflected in everyday practice: Although viewing everyday behaviour and consumption as suitable starting points for broader change, responsibility for the latter is mostly delegated to reformed state policies. Accordingly, personal mobility, communication, and dietary habits seem to be subject to relatively little ethical-political reflection, and forms

of conscious self-limitation are relatively rarely found. Therefore, we conclude that the ‘field effect’ of Degrowth discourse and practice exerts a relatively weak force, if any, on people in this group. While one segment can thus be seen as the reformist ‘wing’ of the Degrowth spectrum, the rest is in fact not part of the field.

### **Cluster 3: Voluntarist-Pacifist Idealists: Stop believing in growth and seek peaceful global change**

The most striking thing about the views expressed by the third cluster (189 respondents) is that they only clearly deviate from the sample’s average on very few points. The strongest such deviation concerns the idea of a ‘Degrowth party’, which finds majority support – at 63% – only in this group. Furthermore, only eight percent agree that economic shrinkage will bring harsher distributional conflicts (52% reject this), while 63% support the view that only collective belief keeps society clinging to growth (with 14% disagreeing). The practically unanimous plea for nonviolence (only 3% disagree, 85% agree ‘strongly’) and the very clear rejection of the view that changing one’s everyday behaviour will not make the world better (by 76%) add further contours.

Two thirds<sup>\*\*\*</sup> of respondents in this cluster are female, only 11%\* live abroad, and, at 32, they are on average three years younger<sup>\*\*\*</sup> than all respondents. A majority comes from families with a background of tertiary education (54%\* of fathers had university degrees).

A further characteristic is a relatively low level of experience in political activism, as evidenced by the data on memberships and networks: 13%<sup>\*\*\*</sup> (vs. 7%) knew only one other person at the conference, while only 3%<sup>\*\*</sup> (vs. 7%) reported knowing more than 50, only very few are members of unions (3%<sup>\*\*\*</sup>) or parties (6%<sup>\*\*</sup>), and membership in scientific and activist networks was, at 12%<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, also low. The same goes for radical practices: A mere 2%<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

(vs. 7%) lived in alternative housing projects, only 6%\*\* (vs. 13%) had participated in Direct Actions. Identification with the global justice movement is relatively low (28%\*\*), while with other movements it is near the mean.<sup>10</sup> Additional mentions often referred to locally and practically oriented movements (Transition Towns, permaculture), typical fields of ‘youth activism’ (animal rights, anti-racism), but also ‘money reform’ and ‘solidarity economy’. Organizational memberships include environmental groups, local initiatives (urban gardening, food sharing), and cultural projects (theatre, music, alternative city tours).

In terms of everyday practice, mobility, and consumption patterns this cluster widely conforms to what one would expect for a young group dominated by women and students (relatively frequent travel by bus, little meat consumption, many living in shared flats, and the like).

Against this sociostructural background, some conclusions seem legitimate: Apart from the strong support for the idea of a Degrowth party, the strongest stances of Cluster 3 indicate a *voluntarist* attitude: If people realized that growth is harmful for everyone, they would voluntarily settle for less, and conflicts could be avoided even when economic output declines. If everyone could simply opt for Degrowth without experiencing it as a loss, so the logic seems to go, then Degrowth can succeed through a sort of peaceful ‘epidemic’, in which a different practice gains hold and becomes hegemonic ‘from below’. That a party advocating this would then stand good chances of success appears as a logical conclusion. However, what this indicates is probably less a readiness to actively partake in founding a party, but rather an (as yet) unquestioning acceptance of party politics as the way in which democracy is institutionalized.

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<sup>10</sup> The percentage of those identifying with the Degrowth movement – 43% – is not statistically significant.

In sum, the *Voluntarist-Pacifist Idealists* appear to us mostly a transitory state that young activists-to-be pass through. They typically exhibit a youthful idealism that has not been subject to the frustration and disillusionment typically encountered by long-term activists. Their politics is not derived from a fixed worldview, but mostly intuitively guided and morally charged. It departs from practical starting points and hopes to contribute to far-reaching societal change by fostering changes in one's own life and at the local level. All the while, the views expressed are not particularly radical, and especially the more confrontational forms of action and organizing are mostly rejected. If the same respondents were asked the same questions a couple of years from now, many of them could be expected to have moved into a different cluster in the course of gaining activist experience.

#### **Cluster 4: Modernist-Rationalist Left: Emancipatory practice depends on a good theory**

The response pattern of this group of only 107 respondents is in large parts a mirror image of the eco-radical views of Cluster 1. However, there are important exceptions to this rule, which also distinguish the Modernist-Rationalist Left from the other counter-part of Cluster 1, the Immanent Reformers. Generally, items strongly supported by Cluster 1 are broadly rejected in Cluster 4, and vice versa. Exceptions to the pattern are the statements that it makes no sense to oppose capitalism without a viable alternative around (rejected by 70% in C1 and 87% of C4), that the Degrowth movement must clearly distance itself from conservatism (supported by 52% of C1 and 72% of C4), that economic shrinkage will aggravate distributional conflicts (supported by 51% of C4 and 48% of C1), that female emancipation must be an important issue (supported by two thirds of C1 and a full 86% of C4), and that in the North, shrinkage will be inevitable (supported at high rates by both – 87% of C1, 85% of C4).

Since the eco-radical ‘common sense’ expressed by many of the statements tends to be vigorously rejected in this group, many average responses are strongly negative. Most clearly denounced are the call for a rediscovery of life’s ‘spiritual dimensions’ (64%), the view that mankind should return to its ‘natural place’ (63%, 33% nonresponses), and the appeal to return to the lifestyles of earlier generations (71%). Furthermore, 65% are opposed to a Degrowth party, 69% object to the voluntarist critique of people’s alleged faith in growth, and 53% reject the allegation that growth kills off human creativity. Meanwhile, particularly strong support is voiced for a clear distancing from conservatism (72%), for an emphasis on female emancipation (86%), and this cluster is the only one in which a majority expects harsher distributional conflicts in shrinking economies (51%). All in all, this amounts to a classical rationalist-leftist, progressive, and moderately techno-optimistic position that is focused more on questions of just distribution than on ecological issues. Seen from the perspective of the fundamental critique of civilization articulated by Cluster 1, it occupies the far end of the spectrum.

In its social composition, Cluster 4 is significantly more ‘male’ (52%\* men), German (92%\* live in Germany), and more academically educated than the totality of respondents: 74%\* (vs. 65%) hold academic degrees. Also, it is heavily concentrated in big cities: About a quarter\*\*\* lives in Berlin (vs. 12%), another quarter\*\* in cities above 500.000 inhabitants (vs. 16%). The average age of people in Cluster 4 is close to the sample’s mean, but they have typically been active in social movements for a longer time (14\* vs. 12 years).

In terms of lifestyle, regular meat-eaters are twice as frequent as in the sample (14%\*\* vs. 7%), and rail travel is even more strongly preferred (97%\*\* vs. 91%). Political practice is mostly in line with traditional styles of organizing: Disproportionately high shares are union (35%\*\*\* vs. 10%) or party members (20%\*\* vs. 11%), and many are also part of scientific and/or activist networks (28%\* vs. 21%). They most frequently report having attended

demonstrations (84%<sup>\*\*\*</sup> vs. 64%), but are least interested in practical workshops on post-growth practices (21%<sup>\*\*</sup> vs. 32%). While many of them are long-standing social movement activists, they are clearly selective in this, with affinities toward the environmental (39%<sup>\*\*\*</sup> vs. 55%) and Degrowth (28%<sup>\*\*\*</sup> vs. 43%) movements being significantly less frequent than in the other clusters. ‘Other social movements’ named are predominantly ‘typical left’ fields of activism such as feminism, the labour movement, anti-fascist and refugee movements, anti-capitalism, and climate justice.

These details further underpin the overall picture of a faction of academically educated leftists with a male and urban bias, who are predominantly striving for an elaborate and clear emancipatory analysis. Their evaluation of the rationality and desirability of transformative approaches seems to mostly rely on strategic considerations, rather than on moral and emotional criteria or an endeavour to practically change the world and oneself. This cluster closely resembles the ‘trans-forming institutions’ approach in Adler’s (2016: 16) or the ‘anti-capitalist’ variety of growth critique in Schmelzer’s (2015) terminology. From this vantage point, a good transformational practice requires the prior formulation of a sound theory, and forms of activism deriving their principles from anything else tend to be seen as naïve, futile, or even dangerous. For people in other clusters, who are trying to mediate between theory and practice in different ways, this sometimes appears as purely negative criticism of their approaches, leading to misunderstandings on both sides. Still, the basic consensus of the Degrowth spectrum finds very strong support among this group, most fervently concerning its first, ‘growth-critical’ pillar. Therefore, the Modernist-Rationalist Left, although it constitutes the smallest group in our sample and seems at odds with most other clusters in terms of its views, is indeed subject to a strong field effect and should therefore be seen as an integral part of the Degrowth spectrum.

### **Cluster 5: Alternative Practical Left: Revolution through practical self-transformation**

The response pattern of the fifth cluster (177 respondents) combines core elements from the seemingly antithetical approaches of Clusters 1 and 4. The one item that most clearly sets it apart is the clear rejection of the notion that ‘the critique of growth is less about growth as such as about its destructive effects’ (61% no), a statement that majorities in all other clusters agree with. Further items rejected by majorities here are the view that the automobile industry will not be expendable for the next 20 years (68%), that climate change is the greater problem for humanity’s future than social inequality (64%), and that it’s pointless to oppose capitalism without a spelled-out alternative (86% disagreed, only one respondent said yes). Meanwhile, above-average support is voiced for the necessity of ‘revolutionary change’ (56%). All this seems to indicate a fundamental social critique that fiercely objects not only to capitalism, but, more broadly, to industrial civilization as such. In this view, the necessary transformation will require a decisive rupture with existing societal structures. As the relatively low support for the statement that everyone is personally responsible for the negative consequences of their lifestyles (46%) undermines, this view tends to locate the problem at a structural rather than an individual level.

More than average, people in Cluster 5 agree that the ‘spiritual dimensions’ of life should be rediscovered (59%) and that growth has largely killed of human creativity (48%), indicating that their radical oppositional stances contains elements of a critique of alienation. Still, this does not seem to be a romantic-regressive position: Most do not believe that everyone could just stop believing in growth (22% yes, 58% no), and only 9% agree that mankind should return to its ‘natural place’ (32% no, 44% nonresponse). Furthermore, strong support is voiced for a basic income (71%), as well as for female emancipation as an important issue (78%) and the statement that ‘the change must come from below’ (69%). A clear rejection of conservatism is advocated by half of the cluster, albeit at a high nonresponse

rate of 20%. All of these seem to indicate a basic anti-authoritarian and autonomy-oriented stance.

This response pattern clearly sets this group apart from both the ecological radicalism of Cluster 1 and the rationalist critique articulated by Cluster 4. Within the Degrowth spectrum, it seems to occupy a mediating position in that its mostly radical views crisscross the divide between a wholesale critique of civilization on the one and a rationalist-progressive position on the other side.<sup>11</sup> Endorsing spirituality and rejecting the romanticization of nature, structural thinking, and a radical critique of industrial society are reconciled in a non-dogmatic, yet explicitly anticapitalist and anti-dominational position.

Respondents in this cluster were significantly more likely than others not to report their gender (7%\* vs. 4%) or age (4.5%\* vs. 2.5%), and they more often live abroad (21%\*), but less often in Berlin (7%\*). The most striking feature of their reported everyday practice is that only 32%\*\*\* (vs. 45%) own a smartphone.

What most clearly characterizes this cluster are its practices of organization and activism: A large portion of its members have participated in Direct Actions (27%\*\*\* vs. 13%) or live in alternative housing projects (14%\*\*\* vs. 7%). They are also often members of alternative economy projects (26%\*\*\* vs. 17%) and scientific and/or activist networks (27%\* vs. 21%). They were the most avid participants in practical Degrowth workshops (41%\*\* vs. 32%), but also attended conferences and similar events more often than others (68%\* vs. 61%). Equally characteristic is their strong movement attachment: Only 8%\*\* reported not identifying with any social movement. Most outstanding is their affiliation with the global justice movement

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<sup>11</sup> The defining importance of this divide for the structure of the field can not only be read off from the diametrically opposed response patterns of clusters 1 and 4, but has also been clearly confirmed by the results of a factor analysis. This analysis, on which we cannot enlarge here for reasons of space, is documented in detail in Schmelzer and Eversberg (forthcoming).

(46%<sup>\*\*</sup>)<sup>12</sup>. Most of these respondents are multi-activists who identify with more than one movement, group, or organization. 38%<sup>\*\*</sup> name at least one ‘other social movement’ they are part of, and 27%<sup>\*\*</sup> one or more ‘other group or organization’. The most frequently named ‘other movement’ is feminism, but ‘commons’, anarchism, anticapitalism, antiwar, sustainability, permaculture, solidarity economy, animal rights, Transition Towns, and urban gardening also all received several mentions. Among ‘other groups and organizations’, attac is most frequently named, followed by self-organized local grassroots groups and transformational or alternative projects (such as food coops, housing cooperatives, or samba groups).

Looking at the overall context of this cluster’s expressed attitudes and reported practices, we see some evidence that this group is actively searching for a way to articulate a radical critique of society and a practice of experimenting with possible alternatives that avoids both the eco-radical and pessimist withdrawal from political struggles that Cluster 1 tends toward and the kind of theoretically detached, inconsequential critical stance that some in Cluster 4 seem to be drawn to. In some ways, this kind of radically critical, yet practically rooted transformational approach draws on the tradition of the ‘alternative’ movements of the 1970s and 1980s (Brückner, 1983; Gottlieb, 2005), which defined themselves in opposition to the kind of mainstream reformism represented in our sample by Cluster 2.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings presented above result from the first large-scale empirical investigation of the attitudes and practices of Degrowth scholars, practitioners, and activists, conducted at the

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<sup>12</sup> The percentage of those identifying with the Degrowth movement – 47% – is not statistically significant.

biggest meeting of this community so far, the 2014 International Degrowth Conference. For the first time, it allows us to expand our knowledge about the social dynamics initiated by Degrowth ideas beyond accounts of the discursive landscape of Degrowth debates and punctual case studies, toward a more comprehensive account of what we call the *field* of Degrowth thought and practices.

Our first core finding is that there is a *basic consensus* that forms the common ground of shared beliefs uniting people within the Degrowth spectrum or, in other words: the *illusio* of the field. It includes the belief that in industrialized countries economic shrinkage is necessary and desirable – both ecologically and from a global justice perspective – and that people here will therefore have to abstain from certain amenities. It also advocates a societal transformation that is feminist, pacifist, and emphatically democratic in nature and, at least in tendency, directed at overcoming capitalism. While these shared beliefs cannot simply be equated with what ‘Degrowth’ can legitimately be taken to mean – a question that is of course to be argued over in academic and political debates – they show that there is substantial common ground in our respondents’ basic convictions, and that these are at least broadly in line with the core intentions of Degrowth thinkers. Indeed, we believe that the strength of this consensus indicates that it can form the basis of a common identity that would justify speaking of a ‘Degrowth movement’ in the full sense. For the time being, we propose to speak of an *emerging movement*.

Our second core finding is that there is a conflictual diversity of several currents within the Degrowth spectrum that, beyond the shared basic consensus, differ considerably both in their stances on various issues and in their social situations, everyday practices, and activism. Specifically, the cluster analyses we conducted to probe the presence of such currents led us, after closely considering a whole series of possible solutions, to settle for a distinction between five currents, namely (1) an eco-radical group of *Sufficiency-oriented Critics of*

*Civilization*, (2) a pragmatic *Immanent Reformist* cluster, (3) a weakly politicized current of *Voluntarist-Pacifist Idealists*, (4) an essentially socialist *Rationalist-Modernist Left* and (5) a particularly activist *Alternative Practical Left*. The most important ideological division within the field runs between an eco-radical critique of civilization, as exemplified by Cluster 1, and a rational Leftist critique of capitalism, as articulated most clearly by Cluster 4.

Based on these findings, we argue that Degrowth, as the bulk of its supporters see it, stands for a practical critique of an ecologically destructive and globally unjust mode of living, starting from a critical engagement with one's own privileges in the context of Northern growth societies. In this view, individual and collective practice here and now represent one (if not necessarily the only) point of departure for the required far-reaching transformations. Within the field of the Degrowth spectrum, this specific approach is most clearly represented in the positions and practices of one cluster, namely the *Alternative Practical Left*. In fact, one could argue that it is precisely the presence of this group that makes it even conceivable for the enormous differences in worldviews and political approaches that exist within Degrowth thinking to eventually be reconciled. In this light, what may appear from a classical leftist perspective as a lack of critical analysis can just as well be interpreted as an intentional, actively pursued alternative mode of critical-transformative action that rests on a different way of articulating theory and practice. Ideal typically, our clustering allows us to distinguish between three forms in which such mediation occurs (see also Adler, 2016): A *separatism of alternative communities* (C1), a theory-driven approach of *critique as practice* (C4), and a 'heterotopian' (Cattaneo and Gavaldà, 2010) *lived critique as motor of self-transformation* (C5). In our understanding, it is the latter that most clearly embodies the specific mode of mediating theory and practice that many now consider a hallmark of Degrowth (D'Alisa et al., 2014; Cattaneo and Gavaldà, 2010; Kallis et al., 2014).

The results presented here show that Degrowth stands not only for a lively political and academic debate, but also for a highly dynamic and diverse social process extending well beyond the scope of the immediate community of a few hundred activist academics who regularly attend Degrowth conferences. Based on the opinions expressed by a sample of those assembled at the Leipzig conference, we have presented a number of arguments to support the claim that Degrowth does have the potential to evolve into a broader social movement. A movement, one could add, that will be urgently needed in European societies in the years to come if the daunting challenges currently mounting – climate change, global ecological and social injustice and the ensuing migration movements as well as the dangers of a racist and reactionary resurgence – are to be met with emancipatory and democratic solutions.

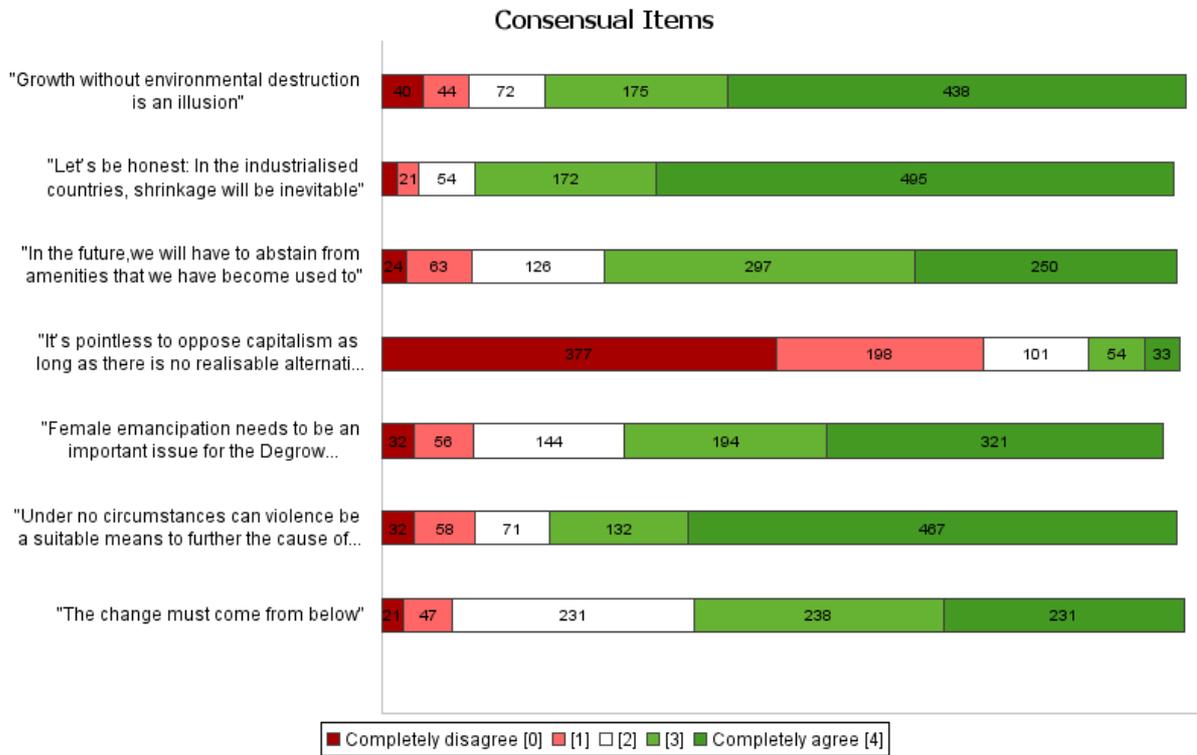
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## Tables and Figures



*Figure 1: The basic consensus*

| <b>Leipzig Degrowth Conference Participants' Survey: Statements and average responses</b>   |                       |               |                   |
|---|-----------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| <b>Statement</b>  | <b>Sample average</b> | <b>Agree*</b> | <b>Dis-agree*</b> |
| Growth without environmental destruction is an illusion   | 4,21                  | 613           | 84                |
| Each of us bears personal responsibility for the negative consequences of their lifestyles  | 3,66                  | 449           | 122               |
| Cities as we know them today will need to be largely dismantled in order to create a post-growth society  | 2,41                  | 387           | 123               |
| To live more sustainably,we should remember and revive the lifestyles of previous generations   | 3,02                  | 277           | 263               |
| It's pointless to oppose capitalism as long as there is no realizable alternative societal concept  | 1,91                  | 87            | 575               |
| If firms were democratically controlled in themselves, it would be much easier to move away from growth   | 3,41                  | 372           | 151               |
| The degrowth movement needs to clearly distance itself from conservative thought  | 3,42                  | 345           | 179               |
| A shrinking economy will definitely lead to harsher conflicts about the distribution of wealth in society   | 3,04                  | 282           | 263               |
| If things don't change,western societies will collapse within a few decades   | 3,61                  | 410           | 149               |
| Man should return to his (and her) natural place in the world   | 2,71                  | 162           | 233               |
| Within the next 20 years,we will not be able to do without the automobile industry  | 2,45                  | 179           | 408               |
| Female emancipation needs to be an important issue for the degrowth movement  | 3,96                  | 515           | 88                |
| Under no circumstances can violence be a suitable means to further the cause of a post-growth society   | 4,24                  | 599           | 90                |
| Changing our everyday practice (not flying, buying environmentally friendly food) will not make the world a better place, since it does not question capitalism | 2,32                  | 155           | 477               |
| Anything short of revolutionary change will not suffice to overcome our society's fixation on growth  | 3,47                  | 381           | 157               |
| Long-distance flights solely for pleasure (holidays, leisure...) should be forbidden  | 2,49                  | 183           | 411               |
| Climate change ist the more pressing problem for the future of mankind than social inequality   | 2,56                  | 162           | 351               |
| In essence, the critique of growth is less about growth as such as about its destructive effects  | 3,28                  | 388           | 244               |
| An unconditional basic income should be introduced immediately  | 3,74                  | 459           | 118               |
| Let's be honest: In the industrialised countries, shrinkage will be inevitable  | 4,47                  | 667           | 36                |
| One aspect of degrowth is to rediscover the spiritual dimensions of our existence   | 3,48                  | 426           | 201               |
| For overcoming the systemic growth compulsion, it is crucial to abolish the interest-based monetary system  | 3,65                  | 394           | 114               |
| There should be a political party for Degrowth  | 2,87                  | 264           | 314               |
| Except our own belief, there is nothing that forces us to go on with the madness of growth  | 2,98                  | 301           | 340               |
| The high level of technological development in today's society is not a hindrance, but in fact an important precondition for a post-growth society              | 3,31                  | 324           | 169               |
| The change must come from below   | 3,8                   | 469           | 68                |
| Growth society has largely killed off people's creativity   | 3,15                  | 342           | 254               |
| In the future,we will have to abstain from amenities that we have become used to  | 3,9                   | 547           | 87                |
| Most people probably need to directly feel the negative consequences of growth in their own life before they get active themselves                              | 3,65                  | 481           | 136               |

\*Sums for scale points 1/2 (disagree) and 4/5 (agree). Marked in grey are absolute majorities (more than 50% of all respondents agreeing to or rejecting a statement, regardless of nonresponses).

*Table 1: Statements and average responses within the sample*