On the back cover, Mike Davis describes this short tract as ‘eloquent and urgent’, and Saskia Sassen as ‘a major contribution’. With celebrity endorsements like this, it’s clear that the authors are tapping the zeitgeist of the radical green left. Short and pithy, the book is just 150 pages long and is clearly designed as a programmatic statement and manifesto, rather than an academic treatise. Aimed at activists, the text marshals all the ecological-economic, common-sense arguments against the growth paradigm. The authors go on to provide a plethora of encouraging examples illustrating how, with COVID-19 as a tipping point, the tide may at last be tipping against the logic of capitalist modernisation. Their proposal for societies ‘slower by design’ (p. ix) purports to chart a path between global ecological collapse and disastrous economic implosion. Degrowth, they argue, must go further than the Green New Deal, building on a bottom-up movement for more ‘equitable and resilient societies’ (p. xiii). This can be achieved by policy packages including global basic income schemes, policies to reclaim the commons, reduced working hours and public finance to support these policies.

All this is to be achieved whilst continuing the struggle against – and here the authors, on seemingly every other page, incant the litany of modern evils – sexism, racism, classism, colonialism and gender exclusion (e.g. p. 61). And here also, I’m afraid, is where I part company with the degrowth movement. There are numerous problems with this manifesto, not the least of which is the failure to engage with the realities of geo-political conflict, which is simply wished away. Without unprecedented international cooperation, it’s difficult to imagine a strategy of degrowth that doesn’t amount to a kind of dangerously utopian unilateral disarmament.

However, the crux of my disagreement is even more fundamental. This version of degrowth assumes that it is possible to contract both the Market and the State whilst retaining what Norbert Elias called the ‘society of individuals’ – i.e. socially and spatially mobile people who are able to collaborate as freely transacting sovereign individuals. As the authors state the ‘purpose of the book is to empower citizens, policy makers and activists to reorient livelihoods and politics around equitable well-being’ (p. 5); to leverage new dynamics of ‘commoning and care’ rooted in ‘positive impulses among individuals and grassroots networks’ (p. xi). This vision centres on eco-communes, co-living arrangements and co-housing, but almost entirely excludes the nuclear and extended family. Thus, it centres on ‘individuals’ – but not families – ‘trying to forge paths’ (p. 50), and ‘forming networks’ (p. 51). But there is no sense of
any resurgence in the salience of monogamy and marriage that arguably has provided the backbone of both peasant and hunter-gatherer society for hundreds of millennia (Tucker 2020; Zimmerman 1947).

In this way, the underlying vision of Livelihood greatly underplays the extent to which these non-familial, baseline ‘survival units’ (e.g. co-housing) depend on fiscal transfers from a growing economy. Any version of Livelihood that could genuinely take up the slack in providing basic physical and material support for individuals in the context of a contracting State-Market, would unavoidably involve the resurgence of ascriptive and binding patterns of reciprocity associated with family (Quilley and Zywert 2019). As I argued in this journal a decade ago, degrowth is not and cannot be a liberal agenda (Quilley 2013)

This aversion to the language and prospect of family is not accidental. Rather it stems directly from a continuing commitment to a modernist vision of emancipation rooted in the Enlightenment, and an understanding of human nature derived from Locke, Rousseau and Kant. Although they refer to a communitarian future, the overarching vision is cosmopolitan and individualist. In this vein, the authors rail against capitalist ‘ways of knowing that have become intertwined with expanding colonial, capitalist and fossil fuel economies’ (p. 3), whilst endorsing the radical feminist critiques of gender that have given rise to, for instance, the explosion of trans-politics. Without taking sides in this debate, the concept of gender fluidity must be the purest expression of Locke’s ‘tabula rasa’ and Rousseau’s vision of the human capacity to shake free of any kind of biological constraint. Although sitting comfortably alongside visions of transhumanism, the radical social constructivism represented by gender fluidity is only thinkable in a high-energy, high-complexity world of socially and spatially mobile individuals.

It’s this Promethean and postmodern vision that leads to a consistently ahistorical, and anthropologically naïve, account of ‘commoning’ as a practice engaged in by individual ‘people’ rather than families, clans and lineages (p. 17). Why is this important? Because if degrowth means anything, it must entail a commitment to facing ecological constraints and so complex trade-offs. If, as Herman Daly would argue, metabolic scale must always contain or condition arrangements relating to considerations of social justice, then degrowth would logically require advocates to embrace the ascriptive pattern of traditional family life and the re-emergence of family-based Livelihood as a significant baseline survival unit.

On occasion, the authors acknowledge this dynamic, albeit obliquely. For instance, referring to Karl Polanyi’s The Great Transformation, they assert: ‘Against millennial traditions in which most humans were socialized to reproduce their families and communities, people had to be goaded to sell their labour’ (p. 21). Earlier we are told that the ‘globalisation of these [capitalist
modes of knowing] has displaced …linguistic … kinship and religious … forms of diversity that have been fundamental to adaptation and resilience throughout human history’ (p. 3). And there are repeated cherry-picked references to Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si* – as if to say ‘even Christians get it’. But nowhere is there any recognition of the tension between any kind of traditional society (peasant, hunter-gatherer, Islamic, Christian) and the cosmo-politan, liberal and Marxian politics of emancipation that is taken for granted in myriad genuflections to the progressive (woke) left (gender politics, radical feminism, voluntarist communalism, decolonisation etc.). Whatever its merits in terms of social emancipation, it’s impossible to disentangle the latter from growth politics and reliance on the state (and so fiscal transfers from the market).

Following their observation in relation to Polanyi, it would be reasonable to ask whether under conditions of degrowth, most humans should once again be ‘socialised to reproduce their families and communities’ (p. 21). This of course (somewhat uncomfortably) intimates a profoundly paleo-conservative vision of *Livelihood* that is at odds with both market-liberalism and left-green cosmo-politanism. Bearing this in mind, it is a salutary reminder that the 1970s classic *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, written by the original degrowther E.F. Schumacher, was very influenced by the social Catholic vision of distributism. This book has a recent sequel (with a foreword by Schumacher’s daughter Dorothy) written by prominent Catholic traditionalist Joseph Pearce: *Small is Still Beautiful: Economics as if Families Mattered* (2006). Pearce is not alone. Plenty of high-profile conservatives have a problem with capitalism (e.g., Dreher 2018). What Kallis et al. have demonstrated very clearly with their pithy state of the art book, is that the degrowth movement remains torn between a conservative logic that points to families, subsidiarity and traditionalism on the one hand, and a social movement that remains wedded to a species of cosmo-politan liberalism on the other. A degrowth movement that engaged the logic of families and subsidiarity might have a much better chance of reaching across the political divide. As Catholic Fox anchor Tucker Carlson observed in 2019, ‘corporations hate your family’. But degrowth has yet to leverage rural conservative discontent with consumer capitalism.

**References**


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