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UNLEARNING: FROM DEGROWTH TO DECOLONIZATION

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Unlearning: From Degrowth to Decolonization

By Jamie Tyberg

I.

Something about Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s “Message from the Future”¹ didn’t sit right with me. Narrated by the youngest Congresswoman herself, and illustrated by artist-activist Molly Crabbapple, this video attempted to paint a post-Green New Deal world. Reflecting the Congresswoman’s Green New Deal resolution² proposed only two months earlier, this video envisioned a future that had won Medicare for All, a federal jobs guarantee, universal child care, and publicly funded election campaigns. Workers were employed all across the United States, without discrimination and with dignity. Scenes showed them building a national smart grid, retrofitting, laying new high-speed-rail lines across the country. The world was vibrant and climate catastrophe had been averted. But still, I wasn’t entirely convinced of it.

In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that without a radical transformation of energy, transportation, and agriculture systems within the next 12 years, the world would be well on its way to warming beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius, the maximum warming allotted for an inhabitable planet.³ By 2030, global carbon dioxide emissions would have to be cut to 45% below 2010 levels and reach net zero by 2050.⁴ While, of course, this requires international effort, the United States has cumulatively used the most energy per capita of any country since 1960. At the same time, the US produces the lowest share of renewable electricity in the world;⁵ its military alone produces more greenhouse gas emissions than 140 countries combined.⁶ This bird’s-eye view reveals that the US is unjustly consuming energy at the highest rate, and not simply for the conservation and reproduction of life, but for non-productive expenditures such as luxury and war. Therefore, these socio-ecological transformations that we must make *must* start in the US.

Yet the video didn’t allude to reducing the US’s energy consumption at all. On the contrary, the video scripts a world where institutions like the military, which, among other things, destroys self-sustaining agriculture, are kept intact. Police officers, elected officials, and soldiers seem to get more airtime than any other occupations. Relatedly, the video advocates for American workers to receive adequate salaries and benefits, but says nothing about ending the overexploitation of dispossessed peoples and

1 The Intercept. 2019. A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. <https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>

2 116th Congress. 2019. H.Res.109 - Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal. <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/house/resolution/109/text>

3 IPCC. 2018. Summary for Policymakers of IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C approved by governments. <https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments/>

4 Ibid.

5 <https://ourworldindata.org/energy>

6 Quartz. 2019. The US military is a bigger polluter than more than 100 countries combined. <https://qz.com/1655268/us-military-is-a-bigger-polluter-than-140-countries-combined>

nations around the world through which America's wealth is accumulated. Apparently, in this iteration of the future, it is taken for granted but not explained how the oppressed and those oppressing could co-exist in harmony.

Why was this overlooked in the mainstream discourse surrounding this beloved viral video? Certainly, there haven't been many hopeful depictions of the post-climate crisis future, so I understand the appeal. But a materialist approach, in the tradition of Epicurus and Marx, would interrogate the contradictions of infinite consumption of energy on a planet with finite resources. That analysis would in fact show that no previous large-scale attempts—capitalist or socialist—were able to remain within ecological limits.

Perhaps these holes stood out to me because I had been engaging with the framework of degrowth. As a descendent of the colonized people of Korea who is not a US citizen by choice and as someone belonging to the last generation that could overcome the climate crisis, I discovered a pedagogical home in degrowth. It is a discourse and a movement singularly unmarked by—and furiously against—the post-Industrial societal common denominator of infinite growth. The degrowth movement is, in my opinion, designed for settlers, as well as “arrivants”. Jodi Byrd, a Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma citizen, defines arrivants in *The Transit of the Empire*, borrowing from Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, as “those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe.”⁷ As a yellow arrivant living on stolen land, I made degrowth my duty, an intellectual and political agitation tool towards decolonization.

According to degrowth historian Timothée Parrique, the degrowth movement “started as an environmental concern for decreasing resource use, to then become the spearhead of emancipatory movements against development, capitalism, and economic growth, to finally mature as a utopian project of its own.”⁸ Over time, degrowth became more than a critique of the current growth society, but a fully-fledged alternative to it, “a frame, where different lines of thought, imaginaries, or courses of action come together.”⁹ In short, degrowth tells us to care for the earth's systems, to care for the people, and to redistribute any surpluses back to the land and the people.

Furthermore, by reading degrowth alongside works by Indigenous and Black thinkers such as Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, I was able to understand how degrowth could be used in service of decolonization. She writes about the need to “frustrate liberal (and other) modes of humanism” through “Black abolition and Native decolonization and new forms of sociality and futurity.” The book illuminated the need for “a process of rearrangement” as opposed to an alternative. This then demanded for the language found in the *First Ecosocialist International*, a common program of struggle published by “100 people from 19 countries across five continents, including 12 original peoples from [Their] America.”¹⁰ In it, the authors remind us that “the only surplus is this system, and that what is lacking is not an alternative to this system, nor the necessity of creating another possible world nor new models, but to recognize that we are the original model.”¹¹

7 Jodi Byrd. 2011. *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*.

8 Timothée Parrique. 2019. *The political economy of degrowth*. <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-02499463/document>

9 D'Alisa, Giacomo, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis. 2015. *Degrowth: a Vocabulary for a New Era*

10 The First Ecosocialist International. 2017. <http://ecosocialisthorizons.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Combined-Strategy-and-Plan-of-Action-of-the-First-Ecoocialist-International.pdf>

11 Ibid

Through these texts, I saw how degrowth could be “a process of rearrangement” back to “the original model.”

That original model is not another productivist, extractivist model disguised as a democratic alternative. The model, then, cannot be what is imagined in Ocasio-Cortez’s “Message From the Future,” for it does not break with the growth paradigm. Instead, the original model is a *process* to tenderly mend what Marx called the “metabolic rift” between human beings and the soil.¹² Towards the goal of decolonization, achieved according to Frantz Fanon only when a natural rhythm is brought into existence, “and with it a new language and a new humanity.”¹³

Degrowth is the unlearning formula consisting of care, autonomy, and sufficiency, the three values Timothée Parrique uses to define degrowth.¹⁴ One that is essential for understanding that the end goal for degrowthers isn’t degrowth. Because it isn’t, decolonization is.

II.

While a new term, degrowth is not a new concept by any means. Its examples span cultures, continents, and civilizations. In Latin America, degrowth principles have been promoted by peasant movements like Via Campesina, and by Indigenous land-use practices. For example, Sumac Kawsay of the Andes’ Quechua people recognizes the inalienable rights of ecosystems to exist and flourish. Within the internal colonies of the United States of America, Black-led organizations like MOVE and Seeds of Wisdom “called for the radical cessation of growth and an end to capitalist and social paradigms that depended on the exploitation of human life and all the creatures inhabiting the biosphere.”¹⁵ For Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter, recommendations put forth by the IPCC, which abide by the “single absolute model of free-market capitalism,” will bring about “devastating results,” and instead she offers the “still extant nomadic or sedentary indigenous traditionally stateless societies—for example, those of the Masai, the San, or the Pygmy in Africa.”¹⁶ Throughout the hill communities of Southeast Asia, Indigenous communities have been evading state capture and practicing sovereignties long before Westerners introduced the concept. These communities and their ways of living have persisted in resisting state violence while protecting and preserving 80% of existing global biodiversity. To repair and heal from this multi-dimensional assault, those of us located in the industrial world must practice the degrowth principles of care, autonomy, and sufficiency now.

Care, before anything else, is protecting those vulnerable and being prepared to do so at a personal cost. It is a principle of non-exploitation that promotes solidarity, and that means, as the Métis and Cree writer M. Gouldhawke says, “struggling alongside others, not pretending to be them...having your own struggle and linking it to that of others, not appropriating the struggles of others.”¹⁷ Interpersonally, care is both an activity and an attitude. An important goal for degrowth is rejecting the Western binary implications of care work so that “caring about” and “taking care of” are no longer masculine, and that “care-giving” and “care-receiving” are no longer feminine. Care is fundamental in supporting

12 John Bellamy Foster. 1999. Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology.

13 Frantz Fanon. 1963. Wretched of the Earth.

14 Parrique. 2019

15 J.T. Roane. 2020. Mothers 4 Housing and the Legacy of Black Anti-Growth Politics. <https://www.aaihs.org/mothers-4-housing-and-the-legacy-of-black-anti-growth-politics>

16 Katherine McKittrick, ed. 2015. Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis.

17 M. Gouldhawke. 2020. Pandemics, Schools and Squats in a Civil Society built on Stolen Land. <https://mgouldawke.wordpress.com/2020/04/27/pandemics-schools-and-squats-in-a-civil-society-built-on-stolen-land>

the mental, physical, and relational integrity of each and every human being and our ecosystems. Structurally, then, unlike today's economy which systematically wastes life, degrowth would establish a care-based economy predicated on restoring life. This world would be one where the value of labor comes from time dedicated to oneself, to family, friends, and to activities in which one's humanity is affirmed and confirmed.

Autonomy is the ability to give laws and rules to ourselves, not imposed on by others, but by and for us, collectively and consciously. Different from independence, autonomy can only be conceived of as a collective project, because autonomy requires self-limitation, a collective restraint from pursuing all that could be pursued. It would mean living by nature's limits and designing into every layer of society a community-centric, ecologically-balanced, and culturally-responsive process to promise future generations clean air, water, and soil. The principle of autonomy also argues against technological solutions to the crisis, so as to veer us away from eco-apartheid. As Italian sociologist Marco Deriu alerts us in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, "the more we rely on external tools for solutions, the less we trust changes we implement independently as part of our subjective choices adherent to our values." He writes that "personal responses and personal production are systematically being replaced with standardized industrial products ... even the simplest needs cannot be met outside of the market,"¹⁸ that which is the only entity in the physical world programmed to grow indefinitely. Likewise, autonomy and care alone do not get us to degrowth. We need all three, we need sufficiency.

Sufficiency, according to Parrique, "is a rule of distributive justice stating that everyone today and tomorrow should have enough to satisfy their fundamental human needs, and that no one should have too much in relation to planetary boundaries."¹⁹ In other words, sufficiency would not be possible without the self-restraint required by autonomy or the culture of care that fosters those self-limitations. The principle of sufficiency resembles the Seventh Generation Principle, an ancient Iroquois philosophy, which teaches that the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future. This is possible through *dépense*, which refers to a society using its surplus energy in a way so that all citizens, of all ages and abilities, may devise new, non-harmful ways to build community and collective meaning. Our current industrial society deprives communities of their ability to manage the surplus energy they produce by emphasizing the individual above the collective. This conditioning process of individualization has oriented us so far from the systemic level that we are left unable to collectively construct meaning in life or restore our political sovereignty. *Dépense*, and our shared duty to leave this earth in a better condition than we found it, therefore is significant to our unlearning process, and to transitioning out of the growth society.

III.

As Octavia Butler advises in *Parable of the Sower*, that naming a thing helps one to begin to understand it. Degrowth did that for me. Before even knowing its meaning, the term "degrowth" carried a certain subversiveness—flipping growth on itself, evading co-optation—that piqued my curiosity. Though, not everyone shared this experience. Cognitive scientist Brian Dean argued that the term "ignores pretty much all the advice from the field of cognitive framing on building popular alternatives to conservatively-framed 'common sense.'"²⁰ By common sense he means the way the nature of growth has been

18 D'Alisa, Giacomo, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis. 2015. *Degrowth: a Vocabulary for a New Era*

19 Parrique. 2019.

20 Giorgos Kallis. 2011. In *Defense of Degrowth: Opinions and Manifestos*.

sold as a self-evident truth. Dean warned degrowthers that even negating the enemy frame in such a way would, to their advantage, “activate” their frames in the brain of the reader. But Giorgos Kallis, the Greek ecological economist behind several degrowth texts, expected this. He refutes Dean by asserting that, to those in the Global North, degrowth will feel “deeply unnatural, nefarious, and weakening to the nation,”²¹ and that’s what must be *unlearned*. In the same way that the term degrowth can cause alarm, decolonization also unsettles many in the Global North, as Indigenous scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have pointed out in their paper *Decolonization is not a metaphor*. Though they do point out how decolonization has been bastardized into a “metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools.”²² But with the introduction of a new vocabulary of degrowth, we can double down in denying the unnecessary demand to be positive (used mathematically to indicate growth ad infinitum).

One cannot learn, let alone practice, degrowth without unlearning growth first. Crucial here is Sylvia Wynter with her initiation of “the exploration of the new reconceptualized form of knowledge.”²³ She welcomes “a rewriting of our present now globally institutionalized order of knowledge,”²⁴ and at this juncture in civilization that requires a systemic overhaul, degrowth can be that rewriting and unlearning that transitions our industrial society away from the motivation of infinite growth. Wynter profoundly comments in *On Being Human As Praxis* that the accelerated global warming seen from 1950 and on was largely due to formerly colonized nations becoming independent, and consequently being assimilated into “the economic system of free-trade-market capitalism’s unceasing processes of techno-industrial economic growth.” This point particularly aligns with degrowth, for that economic growth she speaks of was created and is maintained by infinite growth in both negative and positive directions. Through both negative (-) growth and positive (+) growth, capitalism is a dimension dependent on the infinite growth of Indigenous peoples in the form of ongoing land theft and genocide, as well as the infinite growth of Black peoples as a limitless source of stolen, enslaved labor. Degrowth is the process through which we degrow that devious dimension, with the end goal of Native decolonization and Black liberation.

By embracing care, autonomy, and sufficiency, and rearranging society so that those who have been deprioritized and made disposable are made to come first, we can be on our way to a decolonized world. The magnitude of this endeavor, however, is enormous and still there exists quite a distance between the three principles of degrowth and their applications. Between theory and practice.

IV.

In June of 2019, the Festival de la Décroissance conviviale de Montréal (the Montréal Degrowth Festival) took place at a venue called Le Virage for the second consecutive year. According to an opposition letter circulated by five degrowth scholar-activists three weeks prior to the event, this venue, already located on unceded Kanien’keha:ka land, was additionally a “site of conflict for local residents, and a clear example of green growth under the pretense of sustainability.”²⁵ Despite the fact that this venue was located in one of “the most diverse and lowest income communities in all of Canada” that was

21 Ibid.

22 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. *Decolonization is not a metaphor*.

23 Katherine McKittrick, ed. 2015. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*.

24 Ibid.

25 https://docs.google.com/document/d/1b6B3O8cLjSv8xIRQNN9-N_L8Pmoxtb7usQUkei9fD5I/edit?fbclid=IwAR2x-1_1TmEwVa8jSdgVoilJjUts7lsfi6HA_LrAyaRALTEBZXzvL4VoHp1JE

facing a “growing crisis of gentrification,” the festival had been planned to occur there not for the first time (a pardonable act), but a second time (willful participation). The underpinning problem here, again, was that the event organizers saw degrowth as the end goal, as opposed to the means through which to arrive at what must be the end goal: decolonization. Of course, if the starting point is wrong, the outcome will also be wrong.

This story however is an example of how degrowth *can* hold such a space for critical intervention, that calls on us “to be deeply aware of the gulf between where [we] stayed and how [we] might live.”²⁶ By facilitating with care and in a meaningful way for the local residents to program future festivals, the letter attempted to practice the three principles of degrowth.

More recently I have seen what degrowth in practice can be, and is not, in the varying responses to the COVID-19 crisis. One response, what degrowth is not, has been a fatal recipe of American exceptionalism, neoliberalism, and neo-Malthusianism. On the news were people at the beach declaring, “I’m not going to let this virus change my lifestyle,” while others with means traveled, against guidelines set forth by the Center for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC), to their second or third homes, spreading the virus along the way. Many others also directed the blame on all humans equally, much like they are wont to do with the global climate crisis, invoking that “we are the virus” without addressing who that “we” actually is. These non-degrowth responses should altogether be recognized for the failures they are and be abandoned.

Another response, one closest to degrowth in practice, has been to instantly set up neighborhood-based mutual aid networks to provide for those ignored and discarded by the state. In my neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, New York, a network of residents informally formed and fundraised for a mutual aid network called “Bed-Stuy Strong.” In just two months, Bed-Stuy Strong supported over 4,000 neighbors (85% of whom were elderly, immunocompromised, or disabled) with a week’s worth of groceries, amounting to an estimated 80,000 meals. This response of strangers rapidly responding, to the best of their ability, to the needs of disabled people; imprisoned people; unhoused people; immunocompromised people; undocumented people; poor people, reflected the principles of degrowth.

But mutual aid and rapid response is not supposed to be sustained. Abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba recently cautioned us that while we should look to the past to better answer the questions of the present, she is skeptical that any models from the past are fit to address the conditions we face today. Much of what many of us are doing seem to be on the defense, when we desperately require a powerful offense play. The Green New Deal was supposed to be this offensive appropriate for the scale of the change necessary, but it does not fundamentally oppose or attempt to reduce the systems of conquest that led us to the crisis. Luckily, building off this necessary offensive energy is the Red Deal. Proposed by the Red Nation—a coalition of Native and non-Native activists, educators, students, and community organizers advocating Native liberation as a “movement-oriented document for climate justice and grassroots reform and revolution”²⁷—the Red Deal is an extremely extensive and comprehensive call to action that builds beyond the scope of the U.S. colonial state.

The Red Deal is organically compatible with the three key principles of degrowth. So much so that one

26 Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval. 2019. Saidiya Hartman.

27 The Red Nation. 2020. The Red Deal. http://therednation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Red-Deal_Part-1_End-The-Occupation-1.pdf

can conveniently locate and relocate care, autonomy, and/or sufficiency in the Red Deal's 10-point program. Point 10 in particular serves as the culmination of all the previous nine points, and it also is what all degrowthers should strive towards: "the end to capitalism-colonialism on a global level."²⁸ Point 10 also highlights what the Green New Deal could improve upon: advocating for the abolition of capitalism and colonialism, Indigenous sovereignty, and a process of rearrangement back to the original model. With each section of the proposal elaborating on the why and more importantly the how, the Red Deal seamlessly complements degrowth and gives each and every one of us a role to play to reclaim our future.

The contradiction lies in the reality that at the same time that degrowthers themselves don't deny the influence of existing Indigenous modes of living on degrowth itself, many are not at the moment concretely engaged in the process of returning land. On the one hand, a settler or an arrivant shouldn't have a say on what a land back process might look like, but on the other, we don't have to, and degrowth isn't claiming to. Degrowth is not a declaration, but a set of practices, a framework stretched to fit our current conditions that can take us from where we are to where we need to be. With the unlearning formula of care, autonomy, and sufficiency, we can start living, today, as though we have the world that we dream of.

** This text was updated on June 5, 2020 to properly attribute several citations.*

28 I place the following points under the following principles: in care, I saw points three ("an end to the racist state institutions that unjustly target and imprison Native peoples and all oppressed peoples"; or, abolition), eight (an economy that creates "conditions to thrive"), and nine (the human responsibility to end the "horrific violence against our nonhuman relatives"). In autonomy, points one ("the fundamental right to self-determination for their people, communities, land bases, and political and economic systems"), five ("Native women be at the center of Native struggles for liberation"), six ("Native LGBTQ2+ be at the center of Native struggles for liberation"), and seven (the condemnation of "symbolic and representational violence" as "an essential part of any material struggle for liberation"). Points two (steps towards returning land through the application and upholding of "Indigenous rights both on- and off-reservation and federal trust land") and four ("Native youth and Native poor and unsheltered are relatives who deserve support and representation") seemed to me as sufficiency. Particularly point four, in displaying *dépense* through how the surplus energy of a society can be used to care for our elders, our youth.