

## **The Degrowth Debate: Emancipation or Hegemony for the UK's Working Class?**

By Emma River-Roberts

*This is an edited version of the talk that was presented at the [Alliance of Working Class Academics Conference](#), organised in conjunction with the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU), held at Glasgow on June 14<sup>th</sup> 2024. The beginning of the talk started with the rationale for degrowth. I'd written this section in very brief bullet points so I've removed these, as they were for my reference and might not make much sense to the reader.*

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Degrowth sounds great in theory but there's no point advocating for something that's impossible to implement. If we can't even get the basics for everyone such as good quality and affordable housing, how are we going to get within a mile of moving away from economic growth – from capitalism? Within the next decade at the very least I see no chance of this happening. There's too much that has to change in order for this to become politically viable and socially acceptable. But what we can do now is start to lay the foundations and work towards achievable goals that working class people both want and need, that are in line with degrowth's aims such as insulating housing, or for people to have access to clean and affordable energy. Even though changes such as these are non-revolutionary reforms, building collective power at the local is a necessary precondition to building it at the national, and the international – levels of power which are critical to incite a degrowth transition.

I agree with degrowth in principle. But as things currently stand I have severe ethical concerns about attempting to bolster working class support for it. Currently, rather than serving to emancipate the working class, the movement is operating in such a way that our social class is being de-emancipated.

What makes degrowth unique compared to more decentralised movements such as socialism is that a fairly small collective of academics, most of whom are white, middle class and based in Europe shape the movement's overall trajectory at a global scale which is mostly achieved through conferences, research and research communications. But despite decades of criticism – both from within and outside of the movement surrounding the supremacism of these voices, working class voices continue to be sidelined, alongside other under-represented perspectives such as those from the global South. Additionally, much of the movement has failed to acknowledge and address the

issues of classism and middle class privilege, negatively impacting the ability of collectives to cultivate inclusive cross-class environments.

It's strategically cataclysmic, and a lack of working class voices steers the movement in class-blind directions that fetishise poverty such as advocating for voluntary frugality. It's pushed their attempts to build a broader supporting base in completely the wrong direction in ways that are actively unappealing to the working class. And this is done by taking what I refer to as a 'common sense', evidence-based approach – we have all of the graphs, the data and the statistics to back up what we say is right, so of course you should support degrowth. And if you don't it's because you don't understand. So if you don't support degrowth we'll pummel you with more graphs, data and statistics until you do.

Of course educating people about concepts – and indeed clearing up misconceptions is vital. But exclusively adopting an evidence-based approach is completely detached from the relationship that working class people have to policies, of which an overarching theme is a perceived lack of efficacy in new initiatives, because for the most part, the promised results of policies haven't only failed to materialise, for a lot of people their living conditions have gotten exponentially worse.

In the UK poverty rates haven't improved much over the last thirty years, and in the decade after 2011 over one million people died prematurely due to poverty, austerity measures and COVID-19. People are understandably and inevitably disenfranchised, frustrated and increasingly apathetic towards new policy promises no matter how compelling the evidence may be in theory, and I get it: they've been promised the world over decades, if not lifetimes by professionals who claim to have all of the answers, armed to the teeth with all of the graphs, data and statistics. So after all of this what reasons do people have to believe that this time will be any different? They don't, even less so with something as radical as this.

From an outsiders perspective the degrowth movement is just another new, random bunch of people coming along and telling them that they have the key to eradicate poverty, inequality and stabilise the environment. Working class people have heard it all before. And they're experiencing the exact same forms of social exclusion from the degrowth movement that they do in mainstream society. The movement isn't inviting working class people to speak alongside them, to write alongside them, they're speaking at them. It's important to acknowledge that there are people in the movement who are actively working to build alliances with the working class, but here I'm referring to the

failings of degrowth's most visible voices, because this is what outsiders see, and this is what yields the greatest overall influence.

For years working class people have been telling me that they don't want to sit there and be lectured on what they should and shouldn't be doing, by people with no connection to their community and culture, and entirely separated from the realities of working class hardships. Any rational person would agree to leave the sciency bits to the scientists. But when we're talking about the general direction, policies and aims, let the working class speak! If a movement advocates for building alliances and empowering its people, this should happen at every single level, and in every single step. Failure to do so is nothing short of disingenuous.

Democratising degrowth isn't a panacea: it won't by itself attract the amount of people needed to for it to become a force for change, but it stands zero chance of ever broadening its demographic to any discernible degree unless this happens. Working class voices are needed to point out the movement's class-blind spots, and draw focus to the specific needs of working class people that must be factored into a degrowth transition. The inclusion of our social class in this discourse is also a vital component for democratic deliberation.

As I've mentioned, criticism about these issues have been circulating for decades, as have viable proposed solutions to diversify the visible voices in degrowth discourse – so the movement's more privileged individuals know exactly what to do in this regard. The ball's in their court. And personally – perhaps paradoxically, until the movement's problems with diversity are fixed I'm not prepared to galvanise anyone into actively joining these circles. Because I'd be walking people into scenarios of exclusion; social situations where they feel like they don't matter, and to do so is inherently immoral.

Instead of having a privileged few merely promising democracy, empowerment and a better life for all through abstract policy solutions, empower the working class in the here and now and let them speak for themselves. Otherwise, all that degrowth is and ever will be, is a fool's errand.