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To cite this article: Joshua Hurtado Hurtado & Jason Glynos (29 Jun 2024): Navigating desires beyond growth: the critical role of fantasy in degrowth's environmental politics and prefigurative ethics, Environmental Politics, DOI: [10.1080/09644016.2024.2353541](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2024.2353541)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2024.2353541>



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Published online: 29 Jun 2024.



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Navigating desires beyond growth: the critical role of fantasy in degrowth's environmental politics and prefigurative ethics

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ABSTRACT


As a critical environmental political project, the degrowth movement contests the hegemony of economic growth. Much scholarship has sought to unpack degrowth's proposals to reduce matter and energy throughput and to promote socio-ecological justice, democracy and wellbeing. Few studies, however, examine how the movement sustains itself. In this article, therefore, we explore the role fantasy plays in the movement's emergence and sustenance. We draw on semi-structured interviews and officially-disseminated documents to examine the discourse of degrowth through a Critical Fantasy Studies lens, arguing that fantasies structure supporters' desires and sustain the energy lying behind their environmental politics and actions. We suggest that the fantasy of 'mutual dependence and care', in particular, affectively fortifies their efforts to contest economic growth's hegemonic norms and, in doing so, bolsters degrowth's distributed modes of political action while also allowing its members to cultivate a prefigurative ethics of engagement.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 22 November 2023; Accepted 6 May 2024

KEYWORDS Degrowth; fantasy; critical fantasy studies; counter-hegemony; prefigurative ethics; radical contingency

Introduction

The ideas and movement of 'degrowth' have made decisive inroads into policy-making circles, the mainstream media, and academia, as evidenced by events like the 2023 Beyond Growth Conference in Brussels. Degrowth acquires counter-hegemonic significance against the background of the dominant growth paradigm, which underpins the policies of international organisations like the OECD and the United Nations, and also shapes European climate adaptation policies (Remling 2018, Hickel and Kallis 2020). Demaria *et al.*

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(2013) recount how, in the 1970s, intellectuals like André Gorz and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen first attached the French word for degrowth, *Décroissance*, to ideas that proposed a societal path away from economic growth to reduce pressure on ecosystems (Gorz 1972, Georgescu-Roegen 1979). However, it was only in the 2000s that a broader movement started forming in Europe, with activists in France, Italy, Catalonia and Spain adopting the degrowth banner to dispute the dominance of growth-compatible ‘sustainable development’ imperatives in environmental political discourse.

Since then, degrowth has emerged as a loosely-connected movement that organises collective action in ‘overshooting societies’ around reducing matter-energy throughput in a planned, democratic, and equitable way (Demaria *et al.* 2013, Schmelzer *et al.* 2022). Degrowth locates itself in a wider ecology of ‘green movements’ that re-politicise ecological crises by contesting growth-focused practices and norms hostile to environmental sustainability through debate and protest action, and by proposing and prefiguring alternative practices (Alexander 2012, Holdo 2019). The degrowth movement thus embodies a critical environmental political project: it adopts a systemic perspective to examine the relations between ecosystems, societies and economies, remaining attuned to questions of environmental (in)justice and structural power relations (Death 2014).

Degrowth proponents, however, face an uphill battle in dismantling the hegemonic economic growth paradigm (Buch-Hansen 2018). The movement remains somewhat marginal in policy circles and mainstream media because the affirmation of the economic growth ideal, when articulated with terms like ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’, suggests we can confront profound environmental challenges without making hard choices as we rebalance ecosystems, societies and economies (Dale *et al.* 2016, Hammond 2021). Similarly, evidence suggests that general populations in European countries react negatively to the term ‘degrowth’ (Drews and Reese 2018). Despite these challenges, degrowth supporters remain steadfast as they amplify their voice in political parties, social movements and policymaking circles (Baykan 2007, Ahvenharju 2020).

In trying to better understand the character and significance of degrowth as an idea and movement, the literature has tended to focus on two dimensions in particular. Literatures at the intersection of ecological economics and political economy emphasise the *structural dimension*, assessing the prospects of reducing matter and energy throughput given existing structures of economy and nature (Alexander 2012, Schlosberg 2019). Critiques of contemporary institutions aligned with the imperatives of economic growth, on the other hand, foreground the *normative dimension*, presenting and assessing alternative proposals underpinned by values like democracy, justice and well-being (Asara *et al.* 2013, Büchs and Koch 2019). Recent literature also addresses how degrowth contests the hegemony of economic growth

through collective action and sustainable practices (Schmelzer *et al.* 2022, Berglund and Bailey 2023). Few studies, however, inquire into the affective investments sustaining the degrowth movement, especially when viewed against the backdrop of a hegemonic economic growth paradigm that shapes most policy discussions and aggressively cultivates consumer-friendly identities and modes of subjectivity (Hobson 2021). Exploring the psychic dimension¹ of the degrowth movement, therefore, would allow us to draw out the character and significance of the movement's affective aspects, thereby placing the psychic dimension alongside the structural and normative dimensions.

To draw out the relevance of the psychic dimension for the emergence and sustenance of the degrowth movement, we situate our research within the field of Critical Fantasy Studies (CFS), which emphasises and explores the political and ideological significance of fantasy (Glynos 2021a). We mobilise CFS to conduct and analyse interviews with members of eight European degrowth organisations, supplementing this with an examination of their officially-disseminated documents. In our analysis, we aim to show how degrowth supporters' fantasmatically-mediated affective investments orient and energise the contestation of the hegemonic norms making up the regimes of economic growth and capitalism, including norms geared towards the maximisation of productivity, consumption, and profit (Dahlberg 2014). The article thus illustrates the relevance of fantasy for critical environmental politics: we show that fantasy bolsters distributed modes of political action that aim to make societies sustainable, and that members of the degrowth movement cultivate a prefigurative ethics that animates the targeting of the structural causes of environmental harms.

Post-Marxist discourse theory and critical fantasy studies

CFS is a frontier of inquiry within Post-Marxist Discourse Theory (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Glynos *et al.* 2021b) that investigates how discourses exert their fantasmatic 'grip' on subjects, revealing how affect and passion underpin social practices and political struggles (Glynos 2021a). This makes CFS well-suited for grasping the psychic dimension of the degrowth movement. Post-Marxist Discourse Theory might characterise degrowth as a counter-hegemonic movement seeking to contest and re-articulate the way relations between ecosystems, society and the economy have been constituted and maintained within a growth-centric hegemonic discourse (Hickel and Kallis 2020, Schmelzer *et al.* 2022). With the use of concepts such as fantasy, then, a CFS inquiry can help elaborate the psychic dimension of such discursive struggles (Glynos 2008).

Like Lacanian-Marxist scholars, CFS scholars regard the psychic dimension as key to understanding how subjects libidinally attach themselves to

facts about the world (heuristically associated with the structural dimension) or to values and principles (associated with the normative dimension). CFS scholars, however, distinguish themselves from Lacanian-Marxist scholars in two ways. First, they question Lacanian-Marxism's tendency to overidentify psychoanalytic categories like fantasy, desire, and drive with capitalism's dynamics of consumption, accumulation and dispossession (Kapoor 2020). In emphasising the relative autonomy of the psychic and socio-economic domains, CFS scholars can more readily point to the role the psychic dimension plays in discursive struggles opposing capitalism too. Second, and relatedly, a CFS framework facilitates a more detailed examination and evaluation of how fantasmatically-transmitted psychic energy informs the political dynamics that give rise to, sustain, or dissolve a wide range of discourses, in terms of both content and mode of engagement (Glynos and Howarth 2007).

CFS postulates that the logic of fantasy stages and elicits the desires of subjects at an ontological level. In this view fantasy does not oppose reality, but instead helps constitute it: it shapes subjects' desires and structures their affective investments in the world. Fantasmatically-structured affective investments thus help stabilise hegemonic norms or, conversely, facilitate their contestation. The role fantasy plays in this framework can be understood in relation to the idea that our social order rests on *radically contingent* foundations – foundations lacking an ultimate grounding or guarantor. This means that different social orders can emerge through transformation and/or imaginative rearticulations (Glynos 2021a, Glynos *et al.* 2021b). In this context, anxiety emerges as a 'ground zero' affect that responds to intimations of radical contingency. Desires and passions gain their force from the subject's effort to contain anxiety with and through fantasy. The character of affective investments, usually understood in terms of emotions, depends on how anxiety gets 'caught' in the symbolic net of a particular fantasy. A shift in the content of fantasy can therefore induce a shift in the emotional tenor of a subject's affective investments in discourse, with the subject experiencing mixed and unsettling emotions at the cross-roads of competing fantasies, particularly during profound transitions.

How is fantasy conceptualised within CFS? We could initially say that fantasy refers to 'a narrative structure involving some reference to an idealised scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness (the beatific side of fantasy) and, by implication, a disaster scenario (the horrific side of fantasy)' (Glynos 2008, p. 283). We can resolve this picture of fantasy into at least four elements. A first element concerns *existential assumptions* about our world, associated with the subject's fundamental belief system – beliefs that one absolutely takes for granted or, to put it more colloquially, 'feels in their bones' (e.g. that the natural world is fundamentally stable, regardless of our activities). A second

component concerns the *ideal* animating the subject's hopes and aspirations, often projected into an unspecified future. A third component concerns the *obstacles* preventing the realisation of the subject's expressed ideal state, as embodied in, for example, a particular villain. A final element of fantasy concerns less its content and more its status as *guarantor*, often linked to an agent – which can manifest as a heroic figure – who undergirds ('guarantees') our existential assumptions *and* is responsible for our fate, including the realisation of our ideals. Together, these mutually-reinforcing elements account for the 'grip' a fantasy exercises over subjects, structuring their desires and experiences of enjoyment (*jouissance*), and shaping their affective investments in discourse (Chang and Glynos 2011, Behagel and Mert 2021, Ronderos and Glynos 2023).

A reference to fantasy offers researchers the possibility of interpreting a subject's response to the radical contingency of social relations – the realisation the social order could be different and that we could be differently invested in it. Inquiring into a fantasy's content allows researchers to identify the values and facts about the world that elicit a subject's desire, while examining a subject's mode of engagement with fantasy can reveal whether they are 'gripped' by its content or able to recognise their own contingent position in discourse and cultivate an open sensibility toward alternative social orders. The modes of engagement can be ideological when subjects are 'gripped' by a fantasy through over-investment, or ethical when subjects cultivate the capacity to confront contingency more directly and remain open to the emergence of alternative social orders (Glynos and Howarth 2007). What matters for critical political analysis is to understand in detail how fantasy bolsters certain oppressive (or emancipatory) political projects and weakens others. In this view, whether fantasy supports or undermines specific political ideals like democracy will depend on the content of a fantasy (descriptively and normatively plural in character) and the subjects' mode of engagement (ideological or ethical in character).

Environmental politics research has explained how fantasies can (ideologically) bolster the capitalist status quo and populist coalitions (Swyngedouw 2022). It has been suggested, for example, that the fantasy of carbon offsetting structures enjoyment around nature's commodification (Watt 2021). Similarly, it has been argued that fantasies of prosperity and market dynamism depoliticise the EU climate adaptation discourse by externalising responsibility for anthropogenic climate change (Remling 2018). We suggest, however, that fantasy can also energise a critical environmental political project like degrowth to contest the status quo. The appeal to fantasy can reveal how degrowth discourse structures its supporters' desires regarding human-nature relations and new forms of social organisation, driving them

to call for a transformation of the existing socio-ecological order (Behagel and Mert 2021, Schmelzer *et al.* 2022).

Research strategy

We organised our inquiry around data derived from degrowth organisations across Europe. We delimited our research to Europe because degrowth organisations there have a longer history of activism and, especially in Western Europe, a comparatively strong tradition of welfare-state policies that support their emergence. The organisations included degrowth working groups and initiatives listed on the degrowth.info website,² alongside other organisations referred to us in a personal, snow-balling manner. We worked on material gathered from eight organisations from different countries (Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Serbia and Czech Republic), enabling diverse perspectives to emerge naturally, and keeping open the

Table 1. Degrowth organisations: data overview.

Name	Brief description	Number of interviewees and code	Number of documents
Degrowth Switzerland	Regional working group that coordinates degrowth activists nationally	3, DSP	4, including organisation's mission/vision, statement about degrowth, and policy briefs.
Movimento per la Decrescita Felice	Regional working group that coordinates degrowth activists nationally	2, DFP	7, including organisation's mission/vision, statement about degrowth, and policy briefs
Liberation (pseudonym)	Degrowth communication blog	1, LKP	5 blog posts on degrowth, political economy and the ecological crises
Degrowth Copenhagen	Degrowth collective of international degrowth activists	5, DCP	2, a podcast transcript and a presentation
Growthbusters (pseudonym)	Grassroots collective that disseminates degrowth ideas with local stakeholders	5, GBSP	1, a draft of an upcoming manifesto
<i>Sobrevivir al Descalabro</i> (in English: Surviving the Disaster)	Degrowth audio-visual communication project, publishes interviews with degrowth experts	3, SADP	2, the project dossier and mission statement
Commons (pseudonym)	Civil society organisation, organises public talks on commoning and degrowth, publishes scientific communication materials	1, CP	None
Renewal (pseudonym)	Civil society organisation, publishes material on socio-ecological themes, supports solidarity economy organisations	2, RNP	4, including reports and policy briefs

possibility of adding more organisations at a later stage. Our corpus consisted of 15 individual interviews, two focus group interviews, and 25 official documents comprising policy briefs, mission statements, and blog posts (see Table 1).

Overall, we had 22 participants. The members of Growthbusters and Degrowth Copenhagen participated in a focus group format; two members of Degrowth Copenhagen also participated in individual interviews. Across the organisations, the participants had varying degrees of organisational involvement: some were founders or co-founders that had a leadership role, others were project managers and communications specialists, while still others provided general support in the organisations' activities. In terms of gender, 10 participants were women and 12 were men, and their ages ranged from young adults in their early 20s to middle-aged adults in their 50s. Moreover, the research conducted for this article followed the ethics protocols of each of the co-authors' universities.³ Participants gave their consent by reading and signing a form which described the purpose of the interview, as well as protocols for anonymity and data management. Interviewees were also supplied with details about how their data would be processed, indicating that they reserved the right to withdraw their consent to use of their data at any time prior to publication.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted online, each lasting 1–1.5 hours, posing questions about members' involvement in the degrowth movement and their organisation; their emotional responses to socio-ecological crises; practices and activities they felt reflected degrowth principles; strategic aspects of a degrowth transition; and their envisioned degrowth-inspired societies. We manually transcribed and anonymised the interviews in Word, referring to participants by their code (DSP-1, for example, refers to interviewee 1 from Degrowth Switzerland).

Emotions, conceived as sites of affective investment, serve as useful entry points when developing a picture of the degrowth movement and what sustains it (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008). In line with research adopting a CFS-oriented perspective (Chang and Glynos 2011, Lapping and Glynos 2018, Ronderos and Glynos 2023), we identified sites of affective investment in the interviews and documents by tracking emotionally-charged signifiers. We focused on constellations of signifiers that conveyed emotional turmoil, conflictual relations and attachment to specific ideals, which might indicate the psychic underpinnings of the degrowth movement. We adopted an 'illustrative vignette-based' research strategy, drawing out key 'assumptions or presuppositions about human nature and social reality', including 'organizational structures' (Feagin *et al.* 1991, p. 68). Our approach was qualitative-interpretive in character, following a retroductive mode of deliberation (Glynos and Howarth 2007). This involved immersing ourselves in the interview audio-recordings and transcripts, as well as the online documents,

(re)listening and (re)reading, identifying emergent themes and sites of affective investment, and formulating interpretations about the fantasmatic narratives at stake. Doing so allowed us to articulate a degrowth fantasy – the fantasy of mutual dependence and care – that furnished the movement with a normative orientation and also allowed us to make sense of the emotions of degrowth members.

In what follows, we suggest that this fantasy discloses degrowth supporters' desires and their affective relationship to nature and people, with important implications for the targets and character of environmental political action (Pounds 2021). The interviews, alongside the officially-disseminated documents, were revealing not only in relation to the organisational aspects of the movement, but also as regards the psychic dimension of the movement, allowing us to relate this dimension to the way organisations contested hegemonic growth-centric norms.

Sites of affective investment

The interviews contained numerous signifiers articulated with affective potency, like 'ecocide', 'destruction' and 'disaster'. Paying attention to affectively charged signifiers, following their trajectory, and unpacking their context helped us identify the way affect was organised symbolically around emotions. We identified four key sites of affective investment in the psychic experiences of degrowth supporters, centred on the emotions of guilt, rage, sadness and concern.

Guilt expresses a form of aggression directed towards the self, as when degrowth supporters describe their affective relation to their use of one or another mode of transport:

If I am using the car, all the 10 minutes I'm driving, I'm feeling *guilty*. I almost visualise all the pollution going around from my car *in the air*. It is not visible, of course, but my feeling is, 'I'm doing all these horrible things', or whatever. But if I'm on the bike, it's like I feel free from this sort of *guilt, of polluting*. (DFP-1, their emphasis)

DFP-1 experiences guilt when their lifestyle contradicts degrowth's ideal to live within ecological limits. Participating in activities that embody degrowth's ideas, like riding a bicycle as a low-energy mode of transport, liberates DFP-1 from their guilt. Guilt appeared numerous times across the interviews, casting an ever-present shadow over individual subjects' deliberations. One participant described their dilemma around taking a work-related flight as a '*very, very difficult decision*', and characterised their internal conflict in terms of 'debating back and forth for a long time whether I should do this, because I do feel guilty with flying' (DSP-3, their emphasis). In these instances, guilt surfaces when degrowth supporters act

in a way that contradicts their internalised assumptions about the world and what they consider normatively desirable, suggesting they experience psychic conflict.

Other participants experience rage, another manifestation of aggression but directed outwards. SADP-1 mentions feeling rage when linking structural problems to the agents who maintain them:

The problem is that accumulation, injustices and disasters caused by the people with historically-derived power and privilege are increasingly greater and are becoming more apparently problematic [...]. When I think about those people who intentionally lie, manipulate, harm, of course that maximises my rage, and that is one of the engines that mobilises me. (SADP-1)

For SADP-1, rage appears as an overpowering emotion targeting those deemed responsible for ecological harm. Although this case exhibits the most explicit articulation of rage, other degrowth supporters manifested anger when discussing their life situation: *'now I am working for the stock market in London! Which is completely opposed to everything I believe in. Which is savage capitalism. And financial analysis. And I always criticise everything, and I say that everything is shit'* (LKP, their emphasis). In the interview, LKP displayed visible signs of frustration, disbelief and anger at working for an institution that reinforces structural problems and embodies undesirable normative values.

Sadness names another site of affective investment that emerged in response to identified socio-ecological harms, and in response to the constriction of human potential by the lifestyles promoted within an economic growth regime. DFP-1 described how sadness ensued when registering ecological damages: *'to see this system sick or destroyed or hit by something external that is human, or caused by humans, makes me sad'* (DFP-1). DSP-1, in turn, experiences sadness when observing how human potential is *'captured'* to serve undesirable ends: *'a lot of our creative power is going towards things like engineering obsolescence in the form of trends. Which I think is a waste of potential, like ... it is kind of sad'* (DSP-1). In the interviews themselves, however, sadness as an affective site did not appear as invested or as intense as those sites associated with guilt and rage.

Finally, participants also felt varying degrees of concern. When discussing the ecological crises, one degrowth supporter described their feelings as *'intolerable'*, indicating how their emotional turmoil motivates their degrowth activities:

'I've categorised a lot of the emotions that I have surrounding this as related to the climate crises. And not just climate, but environmental crises, in the plural, biodiversity loss, etcetera [...], the destruction of a lot of life and cool stuff that happened to happen on this planet [...]. When I think about like the way the things are set up with the economy [...], I cannot live in this space. I literally cannot live in the space of what it feels like to feel these emotions. (DSP-1, their emphasis)

Our participants discussed their concern in terms of both a background emotional state reflecting the worsening ecological crises, and as a strong emotional reaction to confronting news about the ecological crises and grappling with associated implications.

From a CFS perspective, the emotions of guilt, rage, sadness and concern reveal the subjects' relation to a more fundamental affect: anxiety. Anxiety emerges in response to the subjects' confrontation with radical contingency (Glynos 2021a), but this is emotionally managed as a function of the relevant fantasy at stake. We turn now to sketch out the contours of one such fantasy to contextualise the above emotional experiences and draw out their political and ethical significance.

The fantasy of mutual dependence and care

In this section we articulate a prominent fantasy that appears to animate desire for members of the degrowth movement. We present our findings using quotes from the interviews and documents that signal key elements of fantasy: existential assumptions; an imagined ideal scenario; and obstacles (e.g. villains).

We named the narrative we identified the *fantasy of mutual dependence and care* because its existential assumptions emphasise the interconnectedness of human beings among themselves and also between human beings and the rest of nature. The 'mutual dependence' qualification captures the way reciprocal care appears necessary for human wellbeing. Community bonds and reciprocal care are facilitated in this fantasy by degrowth's existential assumption of human nature as inherently cooperative:

I *profoundly* believe that the human being is cooperative in nature, that the human being is empathetic by nature. It is just that the system, publicity, and big corporate media somewhat numb our senses, all the time. But I also trust that social organisation, that community organisation, are the right path and that us humans tend towards that. (SADP-2, their emphasis)

Another closely-related existential assumption concerns the idea that human wellbeing is inseparable from the care of natural ecosystems and human beings. Degrowth supporters encourage others to 'know the territory in which you live and the natural and human resources it offers, also in terms of know-how deriving from traditional knowledge (crafts, popular culture, cultivation methods)' (MDF document 1). Knowing both self and nature is important to flourish within a territory: 'Stop to contemplate Nature, understand its cycles and compare them with the industrial cycles that are the basis of one's production and consumption model. Compare your own rhythms with those of Nature' (MDF document 1). Here, 'mutual dependence' embodies the idea of learning with and from nature: through practical

learning, mutual care can be fostered among humans and between humans and nature.

A degrowth society built on principles of interconnectedness and mutual care already signals an idealised stability and quality of life that applies to the whole of nature, not just humans. The mention of ‘community’ with the more-than-human world highlights degrowth members’ desire to align themselves with the rest of nature, caring for one another in mutually-nurturing relationships:

[W]hen I say community, I also want to underline that I am also thinking about . . . to a certain extent, also including more-than-human life. [. . .] [W]here we live, and our neighbours of *different species* (laughs) that we love and are around us. And the way that we take care of that, and feeling that we care for our gardens and they care for us. (DSP-1, their emphasis)

The connection to nature articulated here is *relational* — the wellbeing and flourishing of humans and other living beings can only be reached by reciprocally caring for one another. Through caring relations, an ideal state can be realised, one centred on multi-species justice (Bendik-Keymer 2022).

Three signifying features, in particular, embody the beatific, idealised expression of this fantasy: nature, care, and liberation from (capitalist) work. DFP-1 succinctly conveys the attractive force of nature: ‘I see that the world is an incredibly beautiful system, that it is in equilibrium. And if we just turned to see some mechanisms, also life itself, it’s wonderful, it’s something . . . even magical’ (DFP-1). This account portrays the natural world and whole ecosystems as objects of desire, part of an idealised state that degrowth supporters seek to reach. Care as a highly cathected element manifests in the support desired from others in an idealised state: ‘[know that] if you care for someone, it will be reciprocated and that you will be fine if you are not worried about making the most money’ (Degrowth Copenhagen focus group). Finally, the prospect of being liberated from (capitalist, waged) work also appeals greatly to degrowth supporters, who envision themselves doing meaningful activities with their loved ones: ‘when I’m dreaming what I want to do with my life, I’m just dreaming how I am with my partner, how we will ride a bike and circle the Mediterranean Sea’ (CP).

A number of obstacles appear in degrowth interviewee narratives as a counter-weight to the highly cathected idealised expression of the fantasy of mutual dependence and care. PMDT and CFS emphasise the constructed character of obstacles and indeed degrowth supporters articulate a number of ‘antagonistic Others’ associated with economic growth in terms of structural and organisational enemies. Some documents, for example, discuss the consequences of pursuing economic growth within the confines of a capitalist patriarchy, which is

[a] world in decline whose obscene style of mercantile life [...] is based on the exploitation of millions of people. So, we hope that the complex South-North dimension appears transversally, diving into its origins and until the present, to broaden our understanding of the current ecocide. We seek to finally understand the externalities that the capitalist and patriarchal production model bring together. (Surviving the Disaster – Project Dossier)

In accounts like the above, ‘economic growth’ and its structural supports – capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, extractivism – are condemned by degrowth organisations and activists. The condemnation arises from the way economic growth sustains relations of domination, which degrowth supporters seek to dismantle. Importantly, focusing on the enemies’ structural character, rather than engaging in a simple personalised ‘othering’, performs the task of unveiling the hegemonic power relations responsible for perpetrating socio-ecological harms (Death 2014).

The structural enemies in degrowth’s fantasy also appear as organisational figures, such as ‘the military’, ‘the church’, ‘right-wing politicians’, ‘fascists’, ‘Wall Street’ and ‘billionaire CEOs’. The figures are blamed for maintaining hegemonic ideas associated with economic growth: ‘in [my country], people don’t trust in anything: in politicians, NGO organisations, institutions. They mostly trust the Church and the military [...]. And then it’s a problem to explain to people new ideas’ (CP). Similarly, responsibility for harms perpetrated upon people, such as the prospect of unemployment, is attributed to such organisational entities: ‘If you work for a private business, you work so that others become richer, even if they deny that [...]. The moment they decide we are no longer needed, we are all dumped on the streets at the same time’ (LKP). Members of the degrowth movement thus link the macro-level structural enemies to visible organisational entities.

The fantasy of mutual dependence and care thus contains narrative features that structure the desires of subjects invested in it, including fundamental existential assumptions, imagined ideal states, and obstacles standing in their way. In animating a subject’s desire, fantasy operates to keep anxiety at bay, turning intimations of radical contingency into concrete emotions which, however troubling they might be, allow the subject to achieve a degree of psychic equilibrium. Fantasies therefore facilitate the making sense of emotional experiences in content and tenor. For example, the guilt of degrowth members makes sense when they fail to meet their own ideals of mutual dependence and care. Similarly, rage makes sense when degrowth members identify enemies as a threat to these ideals. Moreover, tendencies to ‘personalise’ the cause of failure are weakened in the case of sadness and concern. While sadness reflects awareness of the enormity of the structural and normative challenges, concern displays doubt about successfully facing these challenges in time. However, one element of fantasy, concerning

the ‘guarantor’, lacks a single, coherent articulation in our data. Still, this element is relevant to understand the question of *political agency*, and to assess the political and ethical significance of fantasy for degrowth.

Political significance: energising contestation and distributing political agency

Degrowth’s fantasy of mutual dependence and care helps interpret the emotional experiences of its members. Additionally, it is *politically* significant because those emotions are shaped by the fantasy’s content and therefore primed to resonate with specific ‘norm domains’ wherein degrowth desires play themselves out. This emotional resonance orients and energises degrowth political actions, contesting the relations of domination sustained by economic growth and capitalism and proposing new norms that would realise emancipatory relations. Strong resonances appear between the fantasy and at least two norm domains: (1) workplace relations (concerning care for people), and (2) resource use, governance, and ownership (concerning care for nature and people). This is expected, since the hegemonic discourse of economic growth – in its ‘sustainable’ and ‘green’ varieties – shapes the world according to norms of workplace techno-productivity, energy-intensive resource extraction, and highly centralised and hierarchical forms of governance (Kallis *et al.* 2020). In this context, the fantasy of mutual dependence and care nudges the movement toward specific targets as its members seek to discharge their counter-hegemonic normative commitments.

In the domain of workplace relations, for example, we find a focus on norms governing labour-time. In aiming to be liberated from capitalist work, degrowth supporters propose organising social relations in ways that free people from alienating economic conditions under a growth-centric capitalist hegemony (Schmelzer *et al.* 2022). The policy brief from the Swiss degrowth organisation makes the case for ‘[r]educing working time’ because this ‘can increase people’s wellbeing and contribute to a more equal distribution of work in society’ (Degrowth Switzerland – Policy Brief 1, p. 1). Reducing working time aims to liberate people from capitalist waged work and free up time for care in the sphere of social reproduction (Dengler and Strunk 2018). The brief also points out that reductions in time devoted to work ‘can help ease environmental pressures if designed for that purpose, and if combined with complementary measures’ (Degrowth Switzerland – Policy Brief 1, p. 1). Reducing waged working time therefore breaks with norms of productivity and profit-maximisation found in growth-centric capitalist regimes, and pushes degrowth supporters towards norms that seek to align societies and their economies with natural ecosystems. In sum, the fantasy of mutual dependence and care resonates strongly with norms of social and natural reproduction and sustenance.

Another organisation's document similarly challenges entrenched norms in the domain of resource use, governance and ownership, particularly as regards the extractive, centralised, hierarchical, fossil-fuel energy regimes. Instead, the organisation demands that national governments 'invest in rapid development of renewable energy sources owned by municipalities, small and medium-sized companies, communities, and cooperatives.' This is because the '[d]evelopment of renewables and support for diversified ownership forms can lead to energy self-sufficiency' (Renewal, Report 3, p. 25). The elevated reference to cooperatives, different forms of ownership and self-sufficiency contrasts starkly with the organisation's characterisation of its country's biggest energy corporation, owned by a single individual, as a hydro-carbon 'hyena' (Renewal, Report 3, p. 25).

Thus, both the proposal to reduce working time and the demand to invest in renewable energy sources and support self-sufficient energy cooperatives reveal that degrowth members support norms that promote care, socio-ecological sustainability, economic democracy and collective forms of energy ownership and governance (Szulecki 2018, Schmelzer *et al.* 2022). Moreover, insofar as degrowth members can successfully institute and perform counter-hegemonic norms that embody the fantasy of mutual dependence and care, otherwise 'minor' emotions might find more regular and sustained expressions linked to pride, respect, dignity, and joy. Conversely, expressions of guilt, rage, sadness and concern might diminish as the hegemonic growth-centric norms are replaced by those supported by degrowth members.

In addition to energising the movement toward contesting hegemonic norms in the name of alternative ones, fantasy becomes politically significant for degrowth because its members engage with the fantasy in a way that undermines the idea of a single 'guarantor'. Instead, degrowth supporters emphasise the idea of *distributed political agency*. Some supporters favour state intervention in a degrowth transition, because it would modify subjectivities through public policies and large-scale programmes: 'I still believe that, somehow, we must achieve consensus [...]. And that we must train political leaders who have these ideas, who *understand them* and who can transform them into public policies, into tangible projects' (SADP-2, their emphasis). In contrast, other degrowth members prioritise grassroots activism and direct action: 'if they are in need of good vegetables, we try to connect ... [local worker unions] to associations of community-supported agriculture. And so, we try to build those ties and networks that could actually bring about the social change' (RNP-1).

Accompanying these particular strategic preferences was a 'meta-strategic' acknowledgement that a degrowth future requires fights on multiple fronts and scales, which should be coordinated in an inclusive and democratic manner. Distributing agency across political institutions, and across local and translocal alliances, resonates with recent discussions on

how to strategically enable a degrowth transition: degrowth supporters act on-the-ground, through grassroots organising, to cultivate the desirability of degrowth and thus eventually enter the political sphere (Berglund and Bailey 2023). In the political sphere, the coercive force of the state can, in turn, reorder and/or reinforce newly emerging societal common senses, by transforming institutions and implementing policies that support a degrowth vision (D'Alisa and Kallis 2020, Koch 2020).

As regards its political significance, we could say that fantasy fortifies degrowth supporters' contestation of hegemonic norms associated with the paradigm of economic growth, thus engaging in a political grammar that re-orientes people's assumed norms towards a sustainability transformation (Hammond 2020). But the movement's members also affirm the virtues of a distributed form of political agency. This undermines the fantasmatic-ideological idea of a single foundational guarantor, instead foregrounding a critical politics that distributes agency between the state and grassroots coalition-building, and encouraging a prefigurative political experimentation that helps move beyond the confines of monolithic understandings of strategic action and hegemonic conceptions of representative democracy (Schlosberg 2019, Hammond 2021).

The scope and reach of degrowth's fantasy of mutual dependence and care, however, is worth investigating further. While the fantasy fortifies degrowth supporters' contestation of growth-centric capitalism, degrowth ideas have failed to resonate with other environmental movements, particularly in the Global South. This may be because the degrowth movement has not sufficiently emphasised the decolonisation of North-South relations and the demand for global justice and reparations (Schmelzer *et al.* 2022). Investigating elements of fantasy that elicit the desires of environmental activists in the Global South may therefore reveal whether the demands for global justice and reparations can prompt North-South counter-hegemonic coalitions to form and thus further bolster efforts to contest economic growth and capitalism.

Ethical significance: navigating contingency through a prefigurative ethics

Degrowth's distributed political agency distances degrowth supporters from the notion of a foundational 'guarantor'. They recognise that obstacles to their ideals are predominantly structural, and question simple narratives that pit good heroes against evil villains. Members of Degrowth Copenhagen expressed concern about thinking in binary terms, with DCP-2 affirming 'it's so easy to be a villain with the way the system is built, and it's also very difficult to be a hero'. Thinking in structural terms and distancing themselves from the notion of

a guarantor allows degrowth members to remain attentive to the radical contingency of social relations. This facilitates the navigation of their affective experiences in a way that confronts anxiety instead of over-investing in fantasy.

In navigating their affective experiences more openly, some degrowth members identified tensions and contradictions in their emotional reactions, creating a psychic space in which to attend rather than avoid them. As one might expect from highly educated actors with considerable expertise and experience, many interviewees displayed high levels of self-reflexivity and openness about their discomfort in facing ecological crises and in the dilemmas they face when making personal and organisational decisions. They were attuned to tensions experienced in trying to live up to degrowth's ideals in a world dominated by the ideals of a growth-centred capitalist economy. We can account for these emotional tensions in terms of the simultaneous detachment and re-attachment to competing fantasies during transition periods. From an ethical point of view, however, the interest resides in how these tensions are allowed to surface through acts of reflexivity and attentiveness to radical contingency.

Reflexivity and openness enable subjects to acknowledge emotional responses, such as concern and anger, and harness their affective energy, channelling it towards activities that further degrowth's normative proposals. DSP-3, for example, describes how they manage their affective experiences when confronted with news that showcase the ecological crises:

There are moments several times a year where . . . the IPCC report is published or, I don't know, devastating floods are happening [. . .]. It gets me anxious and terrified. But increasingly I feel what's called *eco-anger*. Like, it just makes me really, really mad. Especially when I read [about] . . . climate change and colonialism. (DSP-3, their emphasis)

Here, the initial response of concern and worry morphs into eco-anger directed at one of the structural enemies in degrowth's fantasy: colonialism. In this process, the timing seems relevant. DSP-3 describes an initial paralysing response to eco-anxiety – 'it really hits me, and then I think I feel really low for several days' – but in navigating their evolving affective experience, they eventually recognise that the negative emotions can be channelled into degrowth's objectives. As concern turns into anger, they become energised to 'work more on certain projects. So, I try to harness that anger [. . .] to motivate me to . . . to act on it' (DSP-3). This account illustrates an ethical way of navigating the affective, psychic landscape. Many degrowth participants appear adept at cultivating their emotions through a more direct confrontation with anxiety and radical contingency, harnessing and directing them towards projects that aim for systemic socio-ecological transformation.

Other degrowth members seem acutely aware of contradictions in their practices, and reflect on how to navigate them. They recognise the limitations of individual behaviour in generating the structural changes necessary to realise degrowth ideals, and recognise that advancing some of degrowth's objectives nonetheless requires some degree of participation in the structures they oppose. DFP-2, for instance, experiences aspects of their behaviour as contradictory:

I'm very much aware of the difficulty of [reducing my personal ecological impact] as long as I live in the society with costs and benefits the society gives to it [...]. I try not to fly, to not take airplanes. But then I travel far to do my research [...]. I [practice] ... ecological agriculture in my garden, but then of course I buy plants to plant in plastic pots. And I try to recycle them and I give them back as far as possible, but still I use all kinds of materials. So, I say, okay, it's not exactly perfect (DFP-2)

Notably, DFP-2 does not reject the identified contradictions, but addresses them and negotiates them. By saying, 'okay, it's not exactly perfect', it appears DFP-2 does not feel overwhelmed, *guilty*, as other members might, but instead accepts the limitations of individual behaviour against structural constraints.

When degrowth members allow themselves to become conscious of their emotions and make sense out of them, without rushing, we observe the performance of a *prefigurative ethics*. While a *prefigurative politics* focuses on the experimental cultivation of new practices embodying counter-hegemonic norms (Monticelli 2021), a *prefigurative ethics* focuses on the ethos informing such experiences. Prefigurative ethics refers to an open, critically reflexive way of navigating the experience of radical contingency in the social order, directing subjects to devise new subjective relations to their complex affective experiences and their own position in discourse. This contrasts with the ideological manner of navigating contingency, wherein subjects reinforce well-trodden affective investments in an often polarising-binary way. By engaging in prefigurative ethics, degrowth members might avoid modes of fantasmatic 'over-investment', questioning the notion of a fundamental 'guarantor' as embodied by heroic figures fighting against evil villains in Hollywood-style showdowns. Instead, this opens up the possibility of forging more complex organisational and strategic arrangements that target the entrenched structures responsible for ecological crises.

We see degrowth members' prefigurative ethics as key in sustaining the movement over time. In contrast to Kapoor's view that 'a drive at least as relentless and obdurate as the accumulation drive' of capitalism is necessary to overcome it (Kapoor 2020, p. 88), we argue that the ethical affirmation of contingency-bound complexity can enhance the chances of degrowth members staying the course in their fight for socio-ecological transformation. What they lose in embracing complexity is

their over-investment in a rather simple and homogeneous picture of the world whose brittle character masquerades as strength. We acknowledge that fantasmatically-structured emotions of guilt, rage, sadness and concern might overwhelm subjects and prompt them to abandon the movement (Hoggett and Randall 2018). However, this abandonment is more likely when subjects over-invest in the fantasies that structure those emotions because over-investment tends to exacerbate the turmoil they experience when degrowth ideals are not met, resulting in those emotions becoming unbearable. Therefore, we see in the cultivation of figurative ethics a means to combat affective over-investment.

Conclusion

In this article we have drawn attention to the role fantasy plays in sustaining degrowth as a movement and as a critical environmental political project that seeks to contest and move beyond the present growth-centred configuration of hegemonic power relations (Death 2014). Without minimising the importance of structural and normative factors, we have foregrounded the significance of psychic factors. Our analysis shows that a subject's identification and participation in the degrowth movement entails the re-wiring of circuits of fantasmatic desire, producing shifts in emotional-affective content. Cultivating an awareness of this process enables many to engage in a kind of 'alchemy of emotions': subjects attentive to the underlying radical contingency of social relations can work on and transform the way they are affectively invested in their practices.

More specifically, in accounting for the emergence and sustenance of the degrowth movement, this article has mobilised a Critical Fantasy Studies approach to unpack its psychic dimension in three respects. First, we argued that fantasy is politically significant for the degrowth movement because it *affectively fortifies members' efforts to contest key norms* performed under the hegemonic sway of economic growth, doing so in the name of alternative counter-hegemonic norms. It is uncontroversial to claim that advancing a degrowth vision entails contesting key norms associated with the status quo. The literature, however, tends to apprehend this contestation with reference to competing economic or natural orders and with reference to the values associated with competing visions. Our research, therefore, contributes to the literature by foregrounding the psychic dimension of the degrowth movement, placing this alongside the structural and normative dimensions. While structural and normative analyses remain central to accounts of degrowth practices, so too are the fantasmatically-inflected affective investments of its members.

Second, we argued that degrowth's contestation of hegemonic growth-centric norms eschews the temptation to seek psychic comfort in external foundational guarantees, enabling the embrace of a 'meta-strategy' grounded in the idea of *distributed political agency*. Finally, we argued that degrowth supporters tend to engage in what we call a *prefigurative ethics*, wherein members negotiate their conflictual, psychic landscape openly, attentive to the radical contingency of social relations. This idea advances our understanding of the conditions that facilitate the expansion and sustenance of the degrowth movement.

The article thus contributes to the environmental politics literature on the degrowth movement because this literature tends to side-line questions of subjective and affective investment in favour of broader political and structural factors. Our research resonates with previous studies that suggest that affects like concern and eco-anxiety, evoked in response to environmental problems, can be constructively managed through appropriate organisational cultures and collective action (Hoggett and Randall 2018, Ojala *et al.* 2021). We showed, in particular, how the fantasy of mutual dependence and care is shared across degrowth networks, allowing degrowth supporters to channel their affective energy in constructive ways, such as formulating policy proposals and forming collective grassroots projects. Future research, however, might explore convergences and tensions between the degrowth fantasy of mutual dependence and care outlined here, and other fantasies that resonate more strongly with populations in the Global South. Since populations of the Global South, particularly in urban areas, remain in thrall to fantasies of capitalist development and economic growth (Kapoor 2020), such empirical research could reveal how the degrowth movement might establish coalitions with Global South environmental movements to contest the hegemony of economic growth and capitalism.

Additionally, the article contributes to Post-Marxist Discourse Theory, including a growing CFS literature, by showing how the degrowth movement can embody an ethical way of navigating radical contingency as part of a broader counter-hegemonic project (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Over-invested responses to crises and tensions complicate the way we detach and re-attach ourselves to competing visions. Even when this re-attachment occurs, an over-invested attachment to new visions inclines subjects to demand purity without compromise, often resulting in subjects' abandonment of those practices, movements and ideals. In this article we have shown how degrowth supporters' practice of prefigurative ethics has allowed them to remain within the movement and sustain it over time by affirming the contingency of social relations and by recognising the complexity in bringing about meaningful socio-ecological change. For this reason, appreciating the role of prefigurative ethics in the degrowth movement can contribute to our understanding of both its emergence and its sustenance.

Notes

1. We adopt the term ‘psychic’ from the field of psychoanalysis in order to foreground the unconscious-inflected individual and socio-collective aspects of our practices and behaviours, considered central to our understanding of discursive articulation and identity construction processes.
2. The degrowth.info website connects multiple degrowth initiatives across the world, while recognising that there are other international degrowth networks as well.
3. The University of Helsinki ethics protocols for research in the social sciences and humanities can be found here: <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/research/services-researchers/ethical-review-research/humanities-social-sciences-and-behavioural-sciences>. The ethics aspects of this research project were also subjected to review by the University of Essex Ethics Committee (Application ETH2223–0376).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to sincerely thank all participants for their time and openness throughout the interviews and focus groups, as well as for their feedback on the process. They would also like to thank the reviewers and editor Graeme Hayes of *Environmental Politics* for their constructive feedback. The authors also wish to express their gratitude for the feedback received from Toni Ruuska, Pasi Heikkurinen, the members of the PROSE and HELSUS research groups at the University of Helsinki, and from Johan Gordillo-García and colleagues from the ‘Movimientos Sociales y Protesta’ (Social Movements and Protest) course at UNAM. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the valuable feedback received at the 2023 Brussels conference ‘Discourse Theory: Ways Forward, 2nd Edition’.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Joshua Hurtado Hurtado’s work on this project was supported by the Maj and Tor Nessling Foundation, under Grant agreement [202200237].

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