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What will spark a degrowth movement in the USA?

by [Sam Bliss](#), originally published by [Uneven Earth](#) | NOV 27, 2016Image source: [Alan Huett](#)

Things are big in the United States of America. Returning home after a year away reacquaints me with big detached single-family homes, big single-occupant vehicles, and big single-species grass lawns. I find wider roads, longer distances, larger supermarkets, and more stuff everywhere.

As a student of ecological economics, it makes me a little anxious. Such individualistic extravagance isn't ecological or economical. I remind myself: it is precisely why I came back.

I spent most of the past year in Barcelona, studying with a group of researchers who are interested in *degrowth* – the idea that humans and other species might live better if the former had a smaller economy. Degrowth is not recession. It is a purposeful, equitable slowing of the rate at which we transform nature into stuff.

Our politicians [pledge](#) economic growth like priests promising eternal paradise in heaven, as if producing and consuming 3 percent more smartphones, assault rifles, and bacon-flavored beverages this year than we did last year is our best bet to achieve the good life. According to a 2015 [study](#), the United States' yearly material footprint – the materials taken from farms, forests, mines, and other extraction sites to make the products Americans consume – measures about 27 metric tons

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per capita. In other words, 163 pounds of nature is extracted *every day* to feed, house, clothe, entertain, and satisfy the average U.S. resident. While the gadgets and garbage have piled up, the number of wild animals has [halved](#) over the last four decades. People, rich people in particular, have conquered the planet in the quest for *more*.

Degrowth means downscaling the human enterprise to share the world nicely with other species and our grandchildren. Degrowth means distributing wealth equitably and prioritizing needs over wants.

But why the word “degrowth” anyway? A [lively, complex](#) debate rages over whether the term is [useful](#) or [harmful](#). I only want to make a few points that relate to the U.S. context.

Renouncing growth today has the potential of flipping every politician's favorite narrative: that only growth can save the poor.

In the wake of elections that gave all three branches of government to the Republican party, the reeling American left must rethink, regroup, and rekindle the smoldering embers of the Bernie campaign. But Bernie Sanders, just like the politicians and financiers he rightly criticizes, is firmly pro-growth.

I cannot understand why. Growth over the last four decades [has not brought](#) substantial wage increases or a functioning healthcare system to the 99 percent, but it has made the U.S. economy unsustainably big in terms of resource use and carbon emissions. We must demand that leaders address inequality and other issues head-on instead of promising that a growing economy will make things better. Degrowth should be our rallying cry.

But degrowth has not yet caught on among academics or activists in the oversized United States. Don't get me wrong, many initiatives here exhibit the values of the degrowth movement – simplicity, democracy, sharing, the rejection of economic growth as *the* goal for society. There's a [network of organizations](#) fighting to create an economy based on justice and ecology, a campaign to [work less](#), a [scholarly group](#) focused on downsizing consumption, and countless community-scale projects from [urban food forests](#) to [bike cooperatives](#) to [tool-lending libraries](#). And there are the water protectors at Standing Rock, standing peacefully in the way of the growth economy's ever-extending tentacles. Yet these projects lack a defiant unifying frame for their collective crusade to construct a socially and environmentally sustainable country.

Mostly, people suppose that degrowth is too negative a term for the American culture of optimism. Per social norms, people in the U.S. are not typically any less than “fine” when asked, “How are you?”

Why hasn't degrowth spread in the United States? At September's [international degrowth conference](#) in Budapest, I spoke with some other degrowthers living in the U.S. about why the word has not been adopted and how we might spark a movement.

Mostly, people suppose that degrowth is too negative a term for the American culture of optimism. Per social norms, people in the U.S. are not typically any less than “fine” when asked, “How are you?” A downward-oriented word like degrowth produces reflexive repulsion.

In response to Trump's victory and the calls by many to “give him a chance,” Jelani Cobb, a professor in journalism at Columbia University, [tweeted](#) that he “had not fully appreciated until now how much the relentless American drive for optimism resembles abject denial.” Denying that a finite planet cannot sustain infinite growth is just another aspect of that abject denial.

Yet in other ways degrowth is too *positive* for the United States. Bear with me. Barbara Muraca, an Italian environmental philosopher who arrived at Oregon State University two years ago, says that ecological intellectuals in the U.S. urge rapidly transforming society to avoid imminent civilizational collapse, whereas the European school of degrowth tends to promote a slow revolution toward living well together with less. The deep-green environmentalists of this country foresee hardship accompanying the end of growth. Degrowth tends to look at the bright side of freeing ourselves from our current unsustainable, unjust economy.

As Muraca sees it, U.S. enviros do not fear the end of the world, but the end of the American Dream. The [science](#) on global environmental limits shows that all

humans cannot drive gas-guzzling trucks and eat sausage every morning – which means it is unfair if some folks do get to live that way. The news is frightening, for its recipients and for the messenger.

To my friend Deric Gruen, who manages the [Rethinking Prosperity](#) project, it is simpler: Americans love growth! Emotional growth, sales growth, spiritual growth, crop growth, earnings growth, growth spurts, growth of my social network. People from the U.S. hear about degrowth and reply, “So you are kind of like redefining growth, right?”

So mainstream green groups refuse to renounce growth. Prominent voices from Silicon Valley to the Bible Belt reject the existence of any constraints on human activity. Muraca’s catastrophist colleagues counter this denial of limits with pleas to prepare for the post-fossil fuel world by consuming less.

Most folks do not want to hear these pessimistic-sounding appeals. So the earnest ecologists shout louder, which turns off everyone not already convinced. Who are we to tell our fellow citizens to restrain themselves, and be happier while doing so? Many residents of the highly unequal U.S. cannot comfortably afford to fill their trucks with gas to guzzle. Meanwhile, the plutocrats in charge of the nation jetset to important gatherings around the world where they discuss what to do about climate change and income inequality.

America doesn’t just need a wake-up call. We need new narratives about what the good life is and how to achieve it. Coming to the University of Vermont to take part in the [Economics for the Anthropocene](#) research initiative is a chance to bring degrowth home, as both a scholarly concept and an activist slogan. Perhaps one day it can be a social and political movement, too. Instead of boasting about the new wave of cancerous growth their policies will trigger, we need candidates that lay out plans to ensure everyone economic security and opportunities to flourish regardless what happens with GDP.

Last year I [cycled](#) across North America, talking about degrowth to anyone who would listen and listening to whomever had something to say about it. Now, in Vermont, I discuss degrowth with other graduate students, undergrads, faculty, and also with the woman who helps me fix my bicycle and the guy kneeling next to me as we dig carrots from the soil. Just mentioning it leads to dynamic and interesting conversations, especially among people previously unfamiliar with the concept.

In the end, it is not about the word, it is about sparking socio-ecological change toward a fairer, smaller, and simpler economy. Degrowth explicitly or by other names.

Sam Bliss suffers from an acute strain of the imposter syndrome that affects most first-year PhD students. He makes okay improvised salads from whatever he finds in dumpsters, though, and is hopeful about surviving his first Vermont winter.



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**LuasWay** • a day ago

Kudos to the author for pursuing work in the (very important!) field of Ecological Economics. This is my understanding of that field, as explained by a character (who is a student of Ecological Economics!) in my 'salt-sprayed' novella about maintaining good health and well-being on a warming, crowded, and ecologically stressed planet:

"Ecological Economics is a growing transdisciplinary field based on the sciences and scientific worldview of today—not of 200 years ago—that re-embraces the full spectrum of social, natural, and behavioral sciences and brings the full potential of our intellectual capital to bear on the huge problems we now face. Basically it challenges the absurd notion of infinite growth on a finite planet. It points out that the Earth is now well past being full in terms of our human impact on the environment. It attempts to bridge the sciences and moral philosophy to create a more honest, fair, and fitting human story for our times. It proposes an economic model of ethical and sustainable development based on three interdependent core principles: sustainable scale of material and energy flows, just and fair distribution of resources, and economic efficiency in the allocation of those resources. Put simply, it's now all about quality, not quantity. Optimums, not maximums."

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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**mwildfire** • a day ago

I think, given the state of this country, including the media landscape and the current culture, no approach to broaching this subject, even if you have the sense to avoid an academic approach relying on abstractions, will get you any response but dave zoom's. Instead, you need to try one of two approaches--build a model of the positive, dynamic, satisfying community that doesn't demand an endless stream of crap flowing from China into the oversized homes and on to the oversized dump...and then find a way to publicize it. Or, depict such a life in some fictional way, preferably using video. The US is a nation of TV watchers whose imaginative faculties have atrophied, so words alone are unlikely to get the idea across. You need to SHOW how attractive such a life could be.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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**piyush2** → mwildfire • 21 hours ago

I think this may be starting to happen even as people may not explicitly acknowledge degrowth and want to push for growth, the ground seems to be shifting even as the meme is not shifting as fast (eventually the meme will relent to the ground reality). The millennial generation is rejecting big houses and cars in suburbs, many are moving into denser urban areas and using public transit/walking/biking to navigate and going into small scale farming and small scale enterprises. Even with the oil prices as low as they are and job recovery, this shift seems to have been there for several years and looks like it is here to stay, even big corporations have noticed it and are gearing up for that future.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**LuasWay** → piyush2 • 21 hours ago

Yes, I am observing the same positive trends. :-)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Dave Zoom** • 2 days ago

Degrowth is already here in flyover country , why do ya think Trump won ? It's the cities where Degrowth has not started , I can take you a dozen towns within a hundred mile radius that have died , one grocery store one gas station / fast food place combined , a closed post office and no money , no bar no cinema just a aging declining population .

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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**Surly Gates** → Dave Zoom • a day ago

That's true now, but wait a couple of decades. Rapid growth of immigrant population is moving into many new states beyond

states like Florida, Texas, California, Arizona, Nevada.

<http://www.pewhispanic.org/201...>

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Surly Gates • a day ago



At least 60 million new US residents since 1970 are the result of immigrants and their descendants. Immigrants are about half of US population growth over that time. A mere 2 million immigrants a year will increase US pop to 600 million by century's end. Converting residents of poor low consumption countries into high consumption Americans by the tens or hundreds of millions isn't very ecological. Any discussion of growth/degrowth without considering immigration policy is an insult to reason. How can ecological economists not know that limiting and decreasing the NUMBER of consumers is essential to any degrowth scenario.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

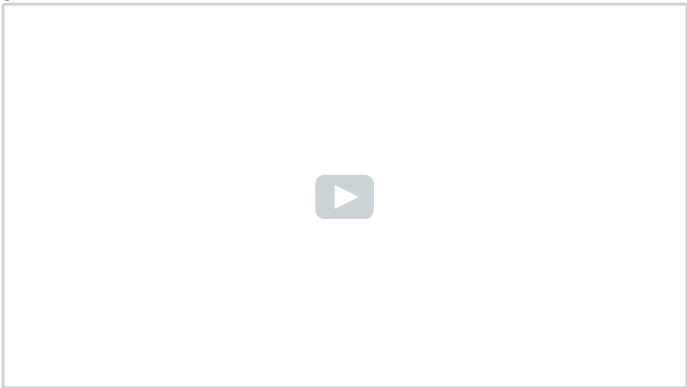
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mwildfire • a day ago



Took me a long time to find this, but it's an example of what I meant, someone illuminating, if with mere words, how a low-impact life can be a good life



1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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