

## **Non-reformist reforms as transformation strategy for the degrowth movement**

The climate crisis has worsened significantly in recent years. Month after month, one temperature record follows the next, while at the same time reports of forest fires, floods, droughts, or the collapse of the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC) dominate the news. At the latest since the publication of the *Club of Rome report* in 1972 (Meadows et al. 1972), it has been clear that we are on a trajectory that will lead us to disaster. Nevertheless, global carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions have been rising continuously since then and the loss of biodiversity is also steadily progressing. It is indeed true that the oil crises of the 1970s led to a switch to less CO<sub>2</sub>-intensive fossil fuels in the western industrialized countries and the collapse of the Eastern bloc led to significantly lower economic activity in those countries, which in both cases reduced per capita emissions (Lamb et al. 2021). However, this decline has been largely offset by the economic development of China and India in recent decades (IEA 2024). The picture that emerges is that countries always follow the same development path when they enter the global capitalist system. A picture that shows that states, as soon as they are confronted with the energy demand caused by increasing economic activity, always rely on energy sources with a high energy return on investment (EROI). Hence, for economic reasons fossil fuels are generally used first, as they usually have a higher EROI than renewable energy sources (Hall et al. 2014). The root of the problem lies in the fact that our economic system forces actors to behave in this way, as they always stand in competition with each other and, in order to survive in a market economy, must grow steadily on the one hand and exploit the cheapest energy resources on the other. Accordingly, there are only two ways out: either due to technological progress the EROI of renewable energies becomes higher than that of fossil fuels, which means that no more investments are made in the latter and the global economy decarbonises. An approach that is mainly advocated by proponents of green growth. Alternatively, a degrowth approach can be pursued, which assumes that we need to shrink certain sectors of the economy on the basis of democratic decision-making processes in order to return to a safe operating space within the planetary boundaries (PB). I will argue that the first approach constitutes a very dangerous strategy, as it is unlikely that technological progress will happen fast enough to raise the EROI of renewable energy sources quickly enough above that of fossil fuels and that economic actors will not voluntarily give up the high EROI of fossil fuels prematurely, which must therefore inevitably lead to deep political conflicts. It would therefore be appropriate for progressive actors to take a closer look at the second strategy, the degrowth approach, in order to develop a decarbonisation strategy beyond the idea of green growth.

From the research side, a stronger focus must be placed on possible transformation strategies, which have so far been largely neglected in the literature (D'Alisa and Kallis 2020). This paper aims to contribute to this research gap by asking what transformation strategy the degrowth movement should ideally pursue. My argument is that it should focus on a transformation strategy called *non-reformist*

*reform*, established by André Gorz (1974), the same person who inspired the name of the movement, as he first introduced the concept of *décroissance* in 1972 (Asara et al. 2015). Gorz originally developed this concept in order to provide a strategy for the labour movement to achieve a socialist society despite the increasingly unlikely possibility of revolution. I would argue that the ecological movement is in a similar situation. Looking at the concept of degrowth from an ecomarxist perspective, it quickly becomes apparent that degrowth is incompatible with the capitalist logic of accumulation. The necessity of a radical break with the existing system therefore becomes evident. On the other hand, there are reformist approaches to the climate crisis which can often be located in the green growth camp and always remain within the *realisable possible* (dt. dem verwirklichbar Möglichen). Although Gorz's approach of *non-reformist reform* has already been discussed in the degrowth literature (e.g. by Petridis (2016), Asara et al. (2015), or Kallis (2018)), the movement mainly advocates prefigurative strategies (Calvário and Otero 2015; Carlsson 2015). Furthermore, the dimension of the state has been largely neglected to date. D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) argue that the concept of the integral state provides valuable insights here. I will show that these fit well with Gorz's argument.

The material used for the analysis is largely derived from degrowth and ecomarxist literature. In addition, studies from the field of ecological economics and texts from the socialist reform versus revolution debate are used. I adopt a hermeneutic approach in order to develop an argument from the available texts. The paper is structured as follows: The first section introduces the issue, briefly explaining the concept of planetary boundaries, which ones are currently being transgressed and how they have evolved since the concept was created. Subsequently, it will be discussed how the transgression of these boundaries is related to our capitalist economic system in order to point out the necessity of turning away from the logic of capital accumulation. As a possible way out of the current trajectory, the concept of degrowth is presented. In particular, current transformation strategies of the degrowth movement will be discussed and a link to Marxist-socialist theory will be established. The next section deals with the debate on reform versus revolution that took place between Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg at the turn of the twentieth century, in order to subsequently present André Gorz's concept of *non-reformist reform*. The penultimate section argues that the ecological movement is in a similar situation to the socialist movement, as the growth imperative is inextricably linked to the capitalist system. My argument is that the degrowth movement should follow a path of non-reformist reforms as a promising transformation strategy, focusing in particular on the dimension of the state. The final section then concludes the paper and summarises the most important arguments once again.