

Essay

Title of the Essay

„Non-reformist reforms as transformation strategy for the
degrowth movement“

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Abstract

This paper poses the question of which transformation strategy the degrowth movement should ideally pursue. It concludes that André Gorz's concept of *non-reformist reforms* constitutes a promising strategy. I first present various transformation strategies and show why it is difficult to abandon the high energy content of fossil fuels within a capitalist logic of accumulation. Subsequently, the ideas behind degrowth are briefly presented and the connections to socialism are discussed. I furthermore analyse which transformation strategies are currently being pursued by the degrowth movement. The paper ends with the conclusion that the degrowth movement should complement its current prefigurative approaches with non-reformist reforms and, in particular, focus more on the sphere of the state. In order to separate the sectors that should not continue to grow from the market logic.

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Acronyms

AMOC Atlantic meridional overturning circulation. 1

CCS carbon capturing and storage. 6

CO₂ carbon dioxide. 1, 4–7, 14

EROI energy return on investment. 1, 2, 4, 5

GDP gross domestic product. 4–7

GHG greenhouse gas. 4

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 6

PB planetary boundary. 1

UNEP United Nations Environment Program. 6

1 Introduction

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 (CO₂) 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 CO₂-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

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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; Bärnthaler 2024). 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 are used. The present work adopts a hermeneutic approach in order to develop an argument from the available texts. The paper is structured as follows: The first section presents theories of transformation according to Erik Olin Wright (2012), including André Gorz's theory of *non-reformist reforms*. I then discuss the concept of EROI and explain why it is of central importance for the ecological problems in our economic system. In a next step, degrowth's approach and its links to socialism are established. Thereby, the strategy currently being pursued by the degrowth movement is explained and related to a Gramscian understanding of the integral state. Finally, it is discussed why Gorz's concept of *non-reformist reform* requires a sophisticated interplay between party and civil society for its success. My argument is that the degrowth movement should follow a path of non-reformist reforms as a promising transformation strategy, and in particular focus more on the dimension of the state. The final section then concludes the paper and summarises the most important arguments once again.

2 Non-reformist reforms as transformation strategy for the degrowth movement

2.1 Theories of transformation

According to the typology of Erik Olin Wright (2012), three different transformation strategies can be distinguished to change capitalism towards a socialist society: Ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic strategies. *Ruptural* transformations represent a sharp, abrupt break with the existing order and can best be described as the revolutionary strategy in which state institutions are taken over in a disruptive manner. *Interstitial* transformations are prefigurative strategies in which an attempt is made to realise the desired society in the present. These approaches usually do not aim directly at power in the state, but try to build up alternatives in parallel and thereby set a positive counterexample. In this way, the horizon of what is perceived as possible is expanded. This approach is often referred to as the anarchist strategy. Lastly, *symbiotic* transformations are mentioned, which Wright also describes under the term non-reformist reforms. This approach goes back to André Gorz (1974), who, in view of the fact that a revolution by the working class was becoming increasingly unlikely in post-war Western Europe, asked whether it would also be possible to implement reforms within the system that do not serve to stabilise it. To address precisely this problem, he proposes the concept of *non-reformist reforms*. According to him, a reform is non-reformist if it does not constrain itself by the possibilities outlined by the capitalist system. Rather, its focus must be on what must be made possible in order to satisfy human needs. The well-known example that Gorz gives in this context is the proposal to build 500,000 residential homes a year. In order to decide whether this is a non-reformist reform, we need to know whether the plan is to expropriate owners of construction land and hand them over to a socialised public developer, which would withdraw a source for private capital accumulation, or whether the intention is simply to subsidise a private developer with taxpayers' money. From this point of view, the Viennese *Gemeindebau Programm* (municipal building programme) of the interwar period, could be regarded as such a non-reformist reform. According to Gorz, socialism should therefore not just aim to realise all its goals after a revolution took place. Rather, the goal must be approached via sub-goals, sub-goals that already contain this goal.

In addition to focusing on human needs, rather than on compatibility with capitalist constraints, a non-reformist reform must furthermore always address the issue of workers' power. Every strengthening of the workers' position of power leads to an intensification of the antagonism, not to its mitigation as in the case of a reformist reform. It is precisely through the public management of the socialised sectors and the resulting orientation towards human needs that

capital is deprived of opportunities for accumulation. Precisely in this way the antagonism is exacerbated further. However, Gorz does not forget to emphasise that it is not possible to simply add up the partial successes to arrive at socialism; with this attitude, one would ultimately be back in reformist thinking. Rather, every structural reform must already be understood as an approach to the goal, which makes this goal more and more tangible. The reforms must still be understood as means, not as ends. To achieve this, however, there must also be an overall perspective to work towards, otherwise Gorz assumes that the path of non-reformist reform is likely to lead to a system similar to that of the Scandinavian countries, rather than to socialism.

2.2 Why fossil fuels are dominant in capitalism

In regard to the question of whether there can be green growth, the argument that is usually put forward is that economic growth merely needs to be decoupled from CO₂ emissions. However, whether economic growth can be separated from CO₂ emissions is highly controversial in the literature. Based on 11,500 scientific papers, Wiedenhofer et al. (2020) and Haberl et al. (2020) conducted a meta-study to evaluate the evidence on this issue. They found that there was often a relative decoupling between gross domestic product (GDP) and various indicators like material use, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and CO₂ emissions. However, absolute decoupling over a longer period of time was a rare exception. Furthermore, they categorised the economic literature examined according to whether it took a green growth, degrowth or agnostic approach and came to the conclusion that 64% of the articles took a green growth perspective, while only 3% could be subsumed in the area of degrowth.

According to Lamb et al. (2021), there was an absolute decoupling of economic growth and CO₂ or GHG emissions in 24 countries, most of which were European, as well as Jamaica and the US. In the countries of the former Eastern Bloc in particular, there was an additional reduction in emissions as a result of the deindustrialisation following the collapse of the socialist systems in those countries. According to the authors, a few countries even reached the reduction rates that would be necessary to achieve the Paris climate targets of a maximum temperature rise below 2°C, but mostly only over a very short period of time. However, the decoupling strategy of increasing economic growth and simultaneously falling emissions would require that these high reduction rates can be maintained over a longer period of time. This expectation is primarily based on the assumption that technological progress will make renewable energy sources increasingly cheaper and thus push fossil fuels out of the market. The decisive value here is the EROI factor of an energy source, which is the ratio between the usable energy (i.e. exergy) that must be deployed to obtain an energy resource and the resulting energy that is received.¹ Hall et al. (2014) conducted a meta-study in which they compared the EROI values for different energy sources. They are able to show that fossil fuels in particular have a high EROI. For

¹e.g. the ratio of the amount of energy that has to be put into the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in order to obtain usable energy over its lifetime.

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example, the most important fossil energy source, liquid and gaseous petroleum, has an average value of 20:1, coal has an average EROI of 46:1 and nuclear energy has an EROI of 14:1. Of the renewable energy sources, only hydropower has a particularly high average EROI of 84:1, but only because the most attractive locations for dams worldwide have already been developed a long time ago. Other renewable energy sources such as biomass has an EROI of 5:1, wind energy 18 to 20:1 and solar photovoltaic an average EROI of 10:1, but they found also studies that only ascribed an average EROI of only 2 to 3:1 to solar energy. These figures show quite clearly why countries usually always choose to develop fossil infrastructure first in the course of their economic development. In view of scarce economic resources and international competition they are forced to opt for the energy sources with the highest EROI in order to succeed in a capitalist economic system. Due to this competitive situation, countries that switch to renewable energy sources prematurely would find themselves in a disadvantageous competitive situation compared to countries that delay the transition. Accordingly, economic elites have little interest in their governments passing laws that would ban the use of fossil fuels before renewable energy sources achieve a higher EROI on their own.

The fact that we can nevertheless see a major switch to renewable energy sources in industrialized countries is primarily due to the fact that the EROI value of fossil fuels has fallen sharply over the last century. While discovering gas and oil fields in the US in 1919 still had an EROI of 1000:1, this value fell to 5:1 in the 2010s. That for production fell from 25:1 in the 1970s to 10:1 in 2007 (Hall et al. 2014). In view of these figures, it is also clear that countries that have already largely exhausted their own resources must either rely on imports or increasingly use renewable energy sources whose EROI has risen as a result of constant further development. This perspective also invalidates any moral claims that western industrialised countries are pioneering efforts to save the environment, as their endeavours are primarily driven by an economic rationale.

It can be argued that the reasons for switching to renewable energies are of course only secondary as long as the switch is made in principle. However, we must also be aware that fossil fuels currently account for about 80% of the primary energy used (oil, gas and coal in roughly equal proportions) (IEA 2022), replacing all these energy sources with low EROI renewable energy will result in a much larger proportion of the economy's total income having to be allocated to energy production. Hall et al. (2014) write that in the last few centuries, social conflicts in industrialised nations have always been attenuated by the use of more energy and technology. If these 'cheap' energy sources are no longer available in the future, this will lead to far-reaching distributional conflicts. Kallis (2017) therefore assumes that capitalism does not adopt renewable energy sources at the same rate as it did adopt fracking gas, as a society purely based on sustainable energy would not be able to support the size of the current economy.

It was demonstrated that although there was absolute decoupling between CO₂ and GDP in some industrialised countries over short periods of time, the reduction rates required for the Paris climate targets were only approached in very isolated cases. Furthermore, it was highlighted that our competition-based economic system creates strong incentives to use cheaper fossil fuels for

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as long as possible and that this unnecessarily delays the switch to renewable energy sources. It remains to be answered whether a green growth strategy can be reconciled with a return to the safe operating space of the planetary boundaries. Considering that a green growth strategy has been advocated by the international institutions of the OECD, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the World Bank since at least 2011, it is at least empirically questionable whether the strategy is successful. Hickel and Kallis (2019) therefore ask whether an absolute decoupling of resource use or CO₂ emissions from economic growth is possible. Their finding is that, at least for resource use, no decoupling from economic output has been observed in the past, as richer countries in particular outsourced resource-intensive activities to poorer countries and these are therefore embodied in trade. In the case of CO₂ emissions, the goal of decoupling in the presence of economic growth is at least theoretically achievable under very optimistic assumptions. However, they show that the models that assume green growth always depend on the large-scale implementation of carbon capturing and storage (CCS). Furthermore, if we do not want to exceed the carbon budget of the Paris climate targets, we would have to achieve annual decoupling rates of 6.4% or 7.3% depending on the predicted global GDP growth rate (typical values would be 2-3%) in order to stay below the 2°C target. This is far from all plausible decoupling rates used in the models. However, if we were to abandon the goal of continuous economic growth, the decoupling rates might come within reach.

2.3 The alternative way – degrowth

The concept of degrowth would offer a way out of the dilemma described above. The term was first used in a public debate in 1972 by André Gorz, in which he questioned the compatibility of the growth-based capitalist system with the delicate equilibrium of the earth (Kallis et al. 2015).

"Is the earth's balance, for which no-growth - or even degrowth - of material production is a necessary condition, compatible with the survival of the capitalist system?" (Gorz 1972, p. IV)

Furthermore, large parts of the scientific degrowth literature find their point of reference especially in the work of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, who was an intellectual pioneer in the field with his concept of *bioeconomics* (Bonaiuti 2015). It was Georgescu-Roegen's ambition to integrate knowledge from physics and biology into economics. In doing so, he particularly referred to the concept of entropy from thermodynamics, which states that in a closed system, a transformation from an initial state A to a final state B is always accompanied by an increase in entropy (Ulgiati 2015). Applied to economics, entropy gives us a value for the degree of degradation of a resource; the higher the entropy, the less usable a resource is (Georgescu-Roegen 1971). Since every conversion is accompanied by an increase in entropy, it is almost impossible

to restore lost matter.² Once there is no usable energy (i.e. exergy) left in a system, no more transformations are possible. In the process of economic activity, however, resources with low entropy are inevitably converted into heat and emissions with high entropy (Kallis et al. 2015). This is the basis of Georgescu-Roegen's central statement that the economy, being based on physical processes, cannot ignore their limitations. Economic growth based on the conversion of finite fossil fuels will inevitably face this natural limits. On the basis of this approach, paradigms such as sustainable development or green growth must be viewed with considerable skepticism. This is the reason why degrowth also assumes that it is not enough to simply transition to a steady-state economy; instead, we need to specifically shrink those sectors of the economy that cause the most increase in entropy. To be truly sustainable, our economic activities should then not exceed the energy provided by solar, wind, deep heat and tidal momentum.

The concept of degrowth itself, however, cannot be subsumed under a single definition. Rather, there are various approaches and currents that have a criticism of growth in common. In this respect, it is of central importance that degrowth is not just about shrinking GDP, but that the focus is on reducing throughput (Hickel 2020). Its aim is to bring energy and resource consumption back to a level where planetary boundaries are no longer exceeded, while at the same time ensuring that human well-being does not suffer and inequality does not increase as a result. Degrowth is distinctly different from an economic recession. Firstly, because it is a planned process in which ecologically harmful activities are deliberately reduced, while those that increase social well-being should continue to flourish. Secondly, because of its focus on distribution issues and a targeted transition to renewable energies. While recessions represent the state in which growth-based economies stop growing, degrowth primarily desires an economic system without the imperative to grow. It is therefore also crucial for the movement that the society moves away from indicators such as GDP, as pursuing them only tempts politicians to implement growth-generating policies. O'Neill (2015) therefore suggests that we should instead use two different sets of indicators to measure the degrowth process. On the one hand, biophysical indicators are needed to quantify resource use, on the other hand, social indicators are needed to measure well-being.

2.4 The connection between degrowth and socialism

Andreucci and McDonough (2015) define capitalism on the basis of five characteristics. In a capitalist system, the means of production are concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, but the majority of the population is free in a double sense - not enslaved, but equally free from their own means of production. In other words, they are forced to sell their labour in return of a wage. However, the products of labour remain with the capitalist who sells them on the market. Furthermore, it is based on a monetary system that functions via bank credit and, finally, the

²One could think, for example, of the large amounts of energy that would be required to capture CO₂ from the atmosphere and convert it back into a usable resource.

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primary goal of production is to generate profit. From a Marxist point of view, capital is not just a quantity of money; rather, capital is value that always seeks to valorise itself. It therefore tends to accumulate by constantly reinvesting surplus value in further production. This is necessary because individual actors in capitalism are constantly in competition with each other as a result of market exchange and are therefore forced to constantly invest in new technologies and more efficient production. It could therefore be argued that the obligation to grow already has its origins in the dominance of the market system and is thus at the core of the capitalist system. According to Andreucci and McDonough (2015), there is accordingly a broad consensus among degrowth advocates that the degrowth project is not compatible with capitalism, but until recently there was a reluctance to state this clearly to avoid jeopardising the acceptance of the project.

Since degrowth is in all likelihood incompatible with capitalism, the question arises as to whether a socialist economic system would be better suited to it. Here, too, the question of growth is the central point of contention, which divided the ecological and socialist movements of the 1970s (Kallis 2017). At that time, a large part of the socialist and communist parties held the view that capitalist production relations inhibit the development of the productive forces, as in a capitalist system only what yields profit is produced (Becker 2009). Freed from this constraint, socialist systems could unfold the true growth potential of humanity. However, it is similarly problematic when eco-socialists adopt an agnostic position towards growth and assume that a socialist system could at least grow in an ecologically sustainable way. From the perspective of degrowth, however, it does not matter which political system we are talking about, growth cannot be sustainable in either socialist or capitalist systems.

Marx's socialism has therefore often been labelled *promethean*, meaning that it was understood to be pro-development, pro-technological and rather anti-ecological. According to Kōhei Saitō (2022), it was Istvan Mészáros who first realised that Marx's writings contain an ecological critique. Even before the publication of *The Limits to Growth* (1972), he pointed out that the productive forces unleashed by capitalism also released destructive forces. Contrary to a linear understanding of historical materialism, according to which the development of the productive forces would bring the means for human emancipation, capitalism would instead destroy the material foundation on which life is based (Mészáros 2014). Subsequently, it was above all John Bellamy Foster (2000) and Paul Burkett (1999) who drew attention to the concept of the *metabolic rift* in Marx's work. According to them, Marx had already developed a theory of metabolism (dt. Stoffwechsel). Whereby he mainly referred to the work of the German chemist Justus von Liebig, who wrote about the robbery system in agriculture in *Agricultural Chemistry* (1862). Marx's main concern was that the emergence of large urban centres as a result of primitive accumulation was robbing the soil of its fertility. This was the case because the waste was no longer used to fertilise the fields but instead caused problems in the cities. Although there were already large urban agglomerations before the advent of capitalism, these civilisations always found a way to keep the fertility of their fields in balance, while the capitalist logic of exploitation applied to agriculture led to the exhaustion of the soil within a matter of half a

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century (Foster 2011). In this way, capitalism leads to an irreparable rift, which follows three dimensions: First, it constitutes a material interruption of a cyclical process in nature; second, the rift also has a spatial dimension, as the nutrients do not remain in place; and finally, there is a temporal dimension, as nature and capital follow different turnover times. In particular, natural processes are much slower than the capitalist logic of valorisation, which always strives to reduce turnover time. However, since capitalism is a dynamic system, it always strives to shift the rift. For example, the development of new technologies could lead to the immediate problem being postponed. In the case of the exhaustion of fields, for example, the development of the Haber-Bosch process made it possible to mass produce ammonia at the expense of massive energy requirements in the form of natural gas. Consequently, there was no cure of the rift, instead the problem was shifted to a higher level. Another way of shifting the rift would be to outsource the problem to other countries, as was the case in the 19th century when the colonial powers of the Global North began to acquire *guano*³ from Latin America on a large scale, leading to the exploitation of Peruvian labourers. The third way of shifting the rift is the temporal dimension, in which the ecological problems are imposed on future generations (Saitō 2022).

In his book *Marx in the Anthropocene* (2022), Kōhei Saitō goes even further than Foster and argues that the theory of metabolism is not merely contained in Marx's critique of capitalism, but rather that the concept of metabolism should have formed the basis of his political economy (Huber and Phillips 2024). At the centre of the theory would still be the concept of labour as the form of human interaction with the metabolism of nature:

"Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature." (Marx 1976, p. 283)

According to Saitō, Marx had dealt extensively with the natural sciences, especially in the later years of his life, and had left numerous notes about his advances in the field. He interprets this fact as an indication that Marx wanted to expand his work on *Capital* in this respect and thus create a physical basis for his political economy. That this project remained unnoticed for the longest time was, according to Saitō, mainly due to the fact that Engels took over the role as editor of *Capital* after Marx's death and did not pay sufficient attention to the corresponding notes. Whether Saitō is right with this argument is controversial (see Huber and Phillips (2024) or Foster (2023)), but with his call for degrowth communism he provides useful arguments for the importance of Marxist theory for the degrowth movement. Specifically, his proposals include a shift from the production of profits to use values, a reduction of the working day, a transformation of the remaining necessary work towards more autonomy for workers, an abolition of market competition, which should lead to a deceleration of the economy and the abolition of the separation between mental and physical labour.

³Guano is seabird excrement that is rich in nitrogen, phosphate, and potassium and is therefore an effective fertiliser

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Kallis (2017) also argues that socialist policies would probably have a negative effect on growth and that socialism would therefore most likely be more compatible with a degrowth transition than capitalism. Although he does not assume that socialism would be the best model for the transition, he does not name any other model either. The advantages of a socialist system would, however, lie very clearly in its focus on use values instead of exchange values, which do not have the property of growing, as they are neither measurable nor comparable. Next, he introduces the argument that the end of exploitation, which socialism strives for, should also have a growth-inhibiting effect. Since the accumulation necessary for growth is based on the appropriation of surplus value by the capitalists. This appropriation can only occur if the means of production are unequally distributed, i.e. people have to sell their labour power for a wage. For this reason, egalitarian societies only generate a small surplus. Conversely, the generation of a surplus also leads to inequality. He therefore concludes that a true socialist society must not accumulate and would therefore not grow. Finally, he argues that a reduction in the division of labour, as is usually sought by socialism, should also lead to a reduction in output, as it is precisely the specialisation tendency under capitalism that increases efficiency.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that socialist approaches are more compatible with the degrowth transition than it may have previously appeared. If we also take into account the socialist desire to depart from the market mechanism towards democratic economic planning (Huber and Phillips 2024), the overall picture is one of extensive overlaps between the two movements.

2.5 What is the current strategy?

The question arises as to how the degrowth movement is currently striving to realise the desired society. Two main approaches are mentioned in the literature: prefigurative strategies like *nowtopias* and the *back-to-the-landers movement* or *non-reformist reforms*. Nowtopias are defined as existing types of solidarity economy that are intended to create the desired utopia of degrowth already in the present. It is a form of labour that goes beyond the dominant form of wage labour. Examples would be producer-consumer cooperatives, urban gardening/farming, do-it-yourself bicycle repair cooperatives or collectives of programmers who provide free software (Carlsson 2015). What all these activities have in common is that they do not provide their labour via the market, but are dedicated to helping each other free of charge. The back-to-the-landers movement, on the other hand, consists of people who move from the city to the countryside to cultivate a radical agrarian lifestyle. They were mainly inspired by the hippie movement of the 1960s and often seek to create a space outside of capitalism by creating eco-communes. A central aim of this is to reclaim the commons again and thus to oppose the alienation of wage labour (Calvário and Otero 2015). The approach is therefore very similar to the prefigurative approaches of the anarcho-communist Gustav Landauer, who also advocated the establishment of socialist communes (Landauer 1919). The second transformation strategy that is mentioned

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in the degrowth literature is André Gorz's 1974 approach of *non-reformist reforms*. However, Bärnthaler argues that degrowth's 'basis' consists primarily of interstitial forms of transformation.

In terms of specific policy proposals, Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) conducted a systematic analysis of 1,166 texts from the degrowth literature over the period 2005 to 2020. They concluded that most of the texts only looked at individual policies in isolation and that most proposals were mainly top-down policies with a national focus. However, one area that has been neglected by the degrowth movement for the longest time is the development of a theory of the state (D'Alisa and Kallis 2020). Yet, a theory of the state is crucial for the successful realisation of the transformation. D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) therefore argue that a link must be made between the practices of the grassroots movements and the role of institutions and proposes Antonio Gramsci's theory of *the integral state* as a theoretical conceptualisation. They criticise the fact that most degrowth approaches so far have primarily appealed to morality and reason in the hope that the proposed ideas will then be implemented. Alternatively, some degrowth scholars assume that the current system will collapse as a result of ecological catastrophes and that the desired society will then come about by itself - why this should be the case and why society should not lapse into despotism instead remains unexplained. It could be hypothesised that the lack of engagement with the state stems from the fact that large parts of the degrowth movement identify with anarchist approaches, which explains why the state is seen as something that is primarily oppressive and therefore needs to be abolished. However, this view of the state as an entity that only functions through coercion is short-sighted, as D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) show with regard to Gramsci's theory.

2.6 How could the degrowth movement proceed?

According to the theory of the integral state, the state consists of two components that reinforce each other (Opratko 2012). The political society on the one hand, consisting of the army, police, bureaucracy and education system, and the civil society on the other, consisting of families, churches, NGOs. Gramsci argued that the sphere of the political society is primarily based on coercive power, while civil society is primarily based on ideological consensus. Importantly, it is not possible for any ruling class to rely solely on force to secure its position; it is rather dependent on establishing hegemony in institutions, practices and everyday procedures and thereby appealing to people's common sense. The common sense can be understood as the way in which the world is perceived in a given epoch, which is characterized especially by the fact that it takes place largely unconsciously. There is always more than one common sense at the same time, whereby the ruling elites, in order to assert their interests, are eager to order the common senses in their favor through a hegemonic discourse. Only in very few cases they will need to use coercion to defend their interests. For a social movement, it is therefore not enough to gain power in a state through elections or a revolution in order to implement the desired policies; a counter-hegemonic discourse must also be conducted in order to cultivate the common sense.

2 Non-reformist reforms as transformation strategy for the degrowth movement

The transformation can therefore only succeed if it is supported co-evolutionary by civil and political society.

This also fits in well with a realisation that André Gorz had in relation to his concept of non-reformist reforms. Gorz first published his text *Zur Strategie der Arbeiterbewegung im Neokapitalismus* (On the Strategy of the Labour Movement in Neo-Capitalism) in 1967, a year before mass demonstrations of revolutionary proportions took place around the world in 1968. However, they were not able to unhinge the existing system. Under the impression of these events, Gorz published the addendum *Die Aktualität der Revolution* (The Actuality of the Revolution), three years later. In his view, the reason for this was that these movements lacked a revolutionary party as a counterpart. While revolutionary reforms must clearly come from the basis, a party is needed at the same time to defend and advance the measures fought for at a political level. Vice versa, the revolutionary party also needs an active base, otherwise it loses its momentum. Gorz thinks that it was precisely this lack of interaction that ultimately caused the May Movement to implode.

What lessons can be learnt from this? Why does the degrowth movement face a similar problem to the labour movement under neo-capitalism? From Gorz's perspective, it is only possible to concentrate on non-reformist reforms, as the argument of the necessity of revolution has lost its clout in a situation where large parts of the working class no longer live in extreme poverty as was the case in the 19th century. From the perspective of the degrowth movement, it is equally necessary to work towards a different system in order to lead the industrialised countries back into the safe operating space of the planetary boundaries. However, it is also faced with the problem that large parts of the population in the Global North benefit from the *imperial mode of living* (Brand 2017) and will therefore not be ready to bring about a different society through a revolution. Especially if it is uncertain what such a society should look like. Instead, it must be shown in the present how the economy could function differently. In theory, degrowth already focuses on non-reformist reforms, but in practice it is primarily prefigurative projects that characterise the movement. However, these projects should be considered on a larger scale; it is not enough to found eco-communes and bicycle repair shops when instead the energy sector and heavy industry must be freed from the pressure to accumulate in order to produce for the needs of society instead of for profit. This is the reason why Gorz's argument about the need for a party structure is particularly relevant. In my view, it fits well with D'Alisa and Kallis' suggestion that the degrowth movement requires a Gramscian understanding of the state (D'Alisa and Kallis 2016; D'Alisa and Kallis 2020). Only if civil and political society co-evolve will it be possible to bring about lasting change. Prefigurative approaches can be helpful for this, as they can be used to build a counter-hegemonic discourse. However, one cannot rely on them alone, but must also have the political sphere in mind alongside civil society. In particular, the degrowth movement should aim to build up party structures or spread its visions much more widely within the existing progressive parties. Only through the interplay of party and movement will it be possible to implement and defend non-reformist reforms that originate from the basis in the

2.6 How could the degrowth movement proceed?

political system. In this way, it could be possible to push back the hegemonic growth discourse that currently characterises the norms in civil society, while at the same time party structures in the political sphere could aim to separate those sectors that are no longer allowed to grow from the market logic and thus from the pressure to accumulate.

3 Conclusion

This paper has posed the question of which transformation strategy the degrowth movement should ideally pursue. I have argued that André Gorz's concept of non-reformist reforms is the appropriate strategy, as the degrowth movement faces a similar problem to the socialist movement when Gorz wrote his text. To this end, I first presented various transformation strategies and went into more detail on André Gorz's approach of non-reformist reform. I then went on to discuss the currently dominant solutions. The prevailing paradigm favours green growth-based approaches, according to which technological progress will solve the problems. Reformist approaches such as the introduction of a CO₂ tax are an attempt to support progress, but the underlying mechanisms are left untouched. Whether decarbonisation can be achieved quickly enough in this way to stay below the 2°C target of the Paris Climate Agreement is highly controversial in the literature. The ideas of the degrowth movement are therefore presented as an alternative to the prevailing approaches. Furthermore, I have pointed out many linkages between degrowth theories and socialist considerations. Although there has long been a divide between the socialist and ecological movements, research in recent years in particular has brought to light more and more connections between the two movements. I have analysed these connections and concluded that the degrowth movement should draw its lessons from the transformation strategies of the socialist movement. To this end, I analyse which strategies the movement has pursued so far. Although non-reformist reforms are already mentioned in the literature, in practice it is mainly prefigurative approaches that are applied. However, as prefigurative approaches usually neglect the dimension of the state and tend to aim at building parallel structures, I point out that they should be linked to a non-reformist reform strategy based on André Gorz's theory. Nevertheless, it must also be emphasised that reforms supported by the basis alone are not enough to bring about sustainable change. It is above all the interplay between the grassroots movement and the party that can bring about real change in society. It would therefore be important for the degrowth movement to develop a profound understanding of the state. For example, as proposed by D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) with Gramsci's theory of the integral state. Similar to Gorz's proposal, it would be the co-development between the civil sphere and the political sphere that is necessary to bring about social change. In this way, prefigurative approaches can serve to build counter-hegemonic discourses and thus shift the realm of the possible within the common sense of the civil society, while non-reformist approaches can bring about the necessary political changes.

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