

How to research something that doesn't exist? Reflections on the methodologies adopted in the literature on the spatialities of degrowth

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Abstract

Nel contesto del dibattito sulla trasformazione sociale ed ecologica negli ultimi anni sono emerse con forza prospettive 'oltre la crescita'. In questo articolo, mi concentro in particolare sulla letteratura, in rapida evoluzione, all'intersezione tra decrescita, geografia umana e pianificazione territoriale. Lungi dal proporre una revisione dei contenuti di tale letteratura, mi concentro sulle sfide metodologiche di un'area di ricerca che studia qualcosa che empiricamente non esiste (ancora): le spazialità della trasformazione socio-ecologica in ottica di decrescita. Identifico quattro principali approcci utilizzati nella letteratura esistente: casi studio di strategie fallimentari ed esempi positivi, immaginari utopici e lo sviluppo di traiettorie, politiche e strategie per il cambiamento; infine faccio alcune proposte per lo sviluppo di ulteriori metodologie.

In the context of the debate on socio-ecological transformation, over the last years 'beyond growth' perspectives have emerged with strength. In this contribution, I focus in particular on the fast evolving literature at the intersection of degrowth and studies of human geography and spatial planning. I do not propose a review of the contents but rather focus on the methodological challenges of a field that researches something that does not (yet) exist: the spatialities of a degrowth transformation. I identify four main approaches used in the existing literature: case studies of what goes wrong and of good practices, utopian imaginaries and the development of pathways, policies and strategies for change. In conclusion, I suggest ways to develop other methodologies.

Parole Chiave: decrescita; studi urbani; metodologia.

Keywords: degrowth; urban studies; research methodology.

In the context of an ever-worsening global socio-ecological crisis, the degrowth paradigm posits itself as an approach that focuses on the question of how to allow a good life for all, along with achieving greater social equity, in a context of ecological sustainability (conceived not as a somehow élite problem of secondary importance but rather as an essential condition for human life). In this context, degrowth considers economic growth not as a means to achieve the well-being of human societies; rather economic growth at all costs – a fundamental trait of capitalism – is at the root of the ecological crisis that

threatens well-being and calls for the need of a systemic socio-ecological transformation (Chertkovskaya, Paulson, and Barca, 2019; D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis, 2015; Fitzpatrick, Parrique and Cosme, 2022). Closely related post-growth approaches are simply uninterested in growth as a social goal and understand its absence as a reality we need to deal with in the near future. Many of the implications of these considerations – by now widely shared among sustainability scholars (Koskimäki, 2023) – seem quite clear at the level of general macroeconomic terms debates: there is, for instance, little doubt that this means an overall global reduction of the social metabolism or aggregate economic activity (Hickel and Kallis, 2020), or in other words, the quantities of matter and energy extracted, transformed, traded, consumed, and there is wide-spread agreement in the de-/post-growth debate that in the endeavor of (at least, partly) governing this transformation for the sake of human well-being, this global reduction must be distributed according to principles of equity (Demaria *et al.*, 2013; Fitzpatrick, Parrique and Cosme, 2022) and sufficiency: i.e., guaranteeing enough resources to everybody, ecologically unsustainable quantities to nobody (Monbiot, 2021; Fitzpatrick, Parrique and Cosme, 2022).

Less obvious are the implications of the de-/post-growth paradigm in other regards, such as the spatiality of a degrowth transformation (Kaika *et al.*, 2023; Krähmer, 2022; Xue and Kębłowski, 2022). Here I draft some methodological reflections around the question of the spatiality of degrowth, understanding methodology as a «meta-level issue about fitting techniques to research questions» (Gregory *et al.*, 2011: 457). Degrowth is not simply an analysis of reality but also a theory and a project of how the identified contradictions in a growth-bound and dependent society are supposed to change, in the tradition of a critical social science that posits itself not only in an analysis of the world's social reality but with the goal to change it (Ivi, 123-124). The fundamental methodological challenge that such an ambition poses is: how can you research something that does not exist? Or, in other words, which research approaches can be adopted to reflect on a degrowth transformation of society, without basing it exclusively on normative value affirmations? Without delving deeply into debates on philosophy of science or methodologies and epistemologies (which might be a

desirable future project of research) about how to approach this challenge, here I reflect on how this question has been tackled in the stream of research I am most familiar with, that on the spatialities (or geographies) of degrowth. This approach also relates to a specific skepticism in the field of human geography on the idea of grand theories and rather a preference for forms of context-based analysis related to forms of situated knowledge (*Ibid.*) which is also methodologically relevant to degrowth as a critique of Modernity and Universal, presumedly rational paths of development (Kothari, Demaria and Acosta, 2014; Kothari *et al.*, 2019), but appears to be sometimes in tension with attempts of modeling and formulating general top-down policy proposals (see Fitzpatrick, Parrique and Cosme, 2022) in what I call, in lack of a better term, 'space-agnostic degrowth literature', for instance in the ecological economics tradition. In the following pages, I share an attempted (not necessarily mutually exclusive) categorization of four methodologies in this literature combined with a short critique of each approach: this should be read as a work in progress, closely related to a literature review I did (Krähmer, 2022) for the theoretical part of my PhD research (Krähmer, 2023).

Case studies focusing on what goes wrong

The first and most obviously 'scientific' approach, in the sense of employing an empiricist approach to the testing of hypotheses (Gregory *et al.*, 2011:190-191) is to look at the empirical reality and analyse it critically in a de-/post-growth perspective. This has been done for instance in relation to approaches of sustainable urban development. Degrowth in general often confronts with sustainable development and green growth approaches as they theoretically share similar final targets (ecological sustainability, human well-being, social justice; admittedly, the precise understanding of these concepts can vary largely) but propose to achieve them different pathways: considering economic growth as a fundamental instrument of change rather than one of the root causes of the problem to be solved. At the macroeconomic level, Parrique *et al.* (2019) and Hickel and Kallis (2020), to just name a few, have effectively debunked the myth of this being a possibility: global data on resource use and emissions clearly shows that even after decades of sustainable

development (Wanner, 2015) the decoupling of ecological impact from economic growth is nowhere to be seen, certainly not with the speed, entity, durability and generalizability needed to stop ecological breakdown. Literature on the implications of degrowth on cities and territories has transferred this theory of the infeasibility of decoupling and sustainable development to the analysis of specific geographies, debating for instance how economic growth *per se* remains centrally inscribed in existing presumedly green urban policies and what contradictions this produces (see, for instance: Cristiano *et al.*, 2020; Krähmer, 2020; Mössner and Miller, 2015; Xue, 2015). These contradictions parallel those of green growth in general, such as the externalization of impacts, rebound effects¹ related to an exclusive focus on efficiency and economic growth at all costs as the ultimate political goal, pursued also through the fix of green or sustainability policies, implemented rather for the sake of competitiveness and growth than the scope of effectively reducing carbon emissions or other forms of ecological impact (Krähmer, 2020).

This research approach has the evident advantage of researching existing cases (be them urban policies and practices as such or their effective outcomes) through the critical lens of the degrowth debate. In this way, it is able to unveil the limits and contradictions of mainstream green city approaches. And it would certainly be desirable to apply this kind of research on a wider number of cases. On the other hand, though, identifying what does not work is only a first step in determining what may work instead. It becomes obvious that growth-oriented strategies of urban (or territorial) transformation are unable to fulfill rigorous socio-ecological goals but it is not yet evident what strategies without growth could be, even more so as many of the specific policies put in place might be sensible even in the context of a degrowth transformation; it is often impossible to decide if one single policy is *per se* attributable to degrowth or green growth, as it is often the context and the combination of different policies that produce the combined effect of effectively reducing ecological impact and social inequalities or increasing

1 Rebound effects – also known as the Jevons paradox – describe the fact that an increase of efficiency of a technology or a system often does not lead to a reduction of resource or energy use but instead to an increase due to the reduction of costs that greater efficiency assures (Alcott, 2015).

them. Take for instance cycling in Copenhagen: the strong policies that have been put in place over the last decades to favor this form of mobility, such as the construction of dedicated bike lanes, bridges, and parking spaces², have certainly reduced car use which is a very important source of ecological impact in cities. Such policies are highly desirable also in a degrowth context. But in the present growth-oriented policy context, this policy alone has not been able to produce satisfactory results, due to impact-shifting (*Ibid.*): as affluence has remained constant, money that cycling residents save is easily being diverted into often equally impactful forms of consumption such as flying for holidays, leaving consumption-based ecological footprints insufficiently reduced. Thus, for a degrowth strategy to be developed, it would be necessary to imagine policies for cycling in combination with other policies and in the context of a general systemic transformation, but the interactions between these components cannot be as easily researched.

Positive case studies

In this research field, another common approach to empirical research on future scenarios has been the focus on what can be defined as good practices and insurgent alternatives. I distinguish these from the critical study of cases ‘focusing on what goes wrong’ above, which is also a study of practices, as this latter approach focuses on the analysis of limits and problems of what are, more often top-down policies and strategies, while research on good practices focuses on the potential of experiments to become blueprints for change (which should not mean that they are uncritical of the limits of such experiments).

Such research has often focused on small, bottom-up and collective initiatives (see also Kaika *et al.*, 2023), be it in relation to housing (Anson, 2018; Dale, Marwege and Humburg, 2018; Lietaert, 2010), urban squats (Cattaneo and Gavaldà, 2010), urban gardening and food provisioning (Spanier and Feola, 2022) or the administration of commons (Micciarelli, 2022). This approach relates to the common advantages and limitations of case study research: focusing on one case in-depth allows to

2 See for instance <https://www.wonderfulcopenhagen.com/wonderful-copenhagen/international-press/bicycle-friendly-copenhagen> (Last access December 2023).

discover the complexities of such experiments and models; on the other hand, the risk is to generalize conclusions which are closely linked to specific personal, geographical, institutional, historical contexts.

A frequent critical question is also related to the possibilities of scaling up and generalizing experiences which need to get out of the bubble to become really transformative (Brokow-Loga *et al.*, 2020; Kaika *et al.*, 2023) but which may also lose their transformative edge precisely in this process; or rather, if not well-accompanied by public policies in the context of system-wide transformation, they risk to yield contradictory outcomes, as Cucca's and Friesenecker's (2021) research on two different cohousing projects in Vienna shows, in which one remains an interesting but elitist project accessible to few, and the other, thanks to a sensitive public intervention, is accessible to low-income families. On the other hand, small experiments can hardly be understood as isolated from the system they try to transform. That means that they remain affected by at least some of its contradictions (see alternative practices of farming in Chile affected by unbalanced power relations in the market; Krähmer, 2023) and that they can never be considered to be perfect examples for a systemic transformation. At the same time, cooptation by capitalist dynamics of profit-making and growth-orientation are a constant risk (Kaika *et al.*, 2023).

Two ways to overcome the scalar limitations of studying alternatives in the context of a growth-dependent society, have been experimented by a small number of studies which have tried to learn from insurgent practices in opposition to situations of crisis, such as the economic crisis in Greece (Varvarousis, 2019) and the resistance to violent forms of state development in Turkey (Akbulut, 2019) or rather, looking at the long-standing experiences of societies, left out from capitalist development, such as, real-existing degrowth in two remote Greek islands (Kallis *et al.*, 2022) or, both of the former, in the cases of the Zapitastas in Mexico and Adivasi communities in India (Nirmal and Rocheleau, 2019).

What seems to be slowly emerging from such case study research, is the development of hypotheses on what makes these case studies actually work and relevant; instead of just remaining limited to the description of a case, many studies

have tried to deduct more general rules, patterns or principles of what makes them transformative and can help for a wider degrowth transformation, such as, for instance, the commons and legal hacks (Micciarelli, 2022), sharing and togetherness (Jarvis, 2019) or sufficiency³ (Over, Brischke and Leuser, 2020).

Imagining utopias

As degrowth proposes systemic change by definition, it is not surprising that utopian thinking has played a considerable role in the imagination of alternatives to capitalist spaces of living. In the context of degrowth, such utopian thinking has often concentrated on the idea of the relocalization of economy and society, imagining human relationships grounded in localized autonomous communities in harmony with their natural/non-urban/rural context (e.g. Widmer and Schneider, 2018; Gerber, 2020; Kallis and March, 2015; and see Mocca, 2020; Krähmer, 2018; Xue, 2014 for criticisms). Widmer and Schneider (2018), for instance, propose a hierarchical organisation of global space based on the neighbourhood as the basic module, with the idea of a direct association of a rural territory for food production to each neighborhood unit.

Such attempts to imagine alternative worlds, cities, territories, allow the researcher to distance themselves from the impediments of everyday issues and questions of immediate political feasibility. They are an important tool to stimulate the imagination of what may be desirable scenarios of change, free from the narrow constraints of a capitalist, growth-dependent present (Kallis and March, 2015). On the downside, these utopian scenarios risk being so distant from existing realities that they miss to reflect on relevant but unforeseen interactions between different aspects of change. This could be particularly relevant when reflecting on the spatialities of degrowth – as degrowth fundamentally requires an overall (but equitable and selective) reduction of the social metabolism, it must be essentially considered that every transformation requires energy – and this certainly regards in particular way the transformation of physical infrastructures such as houses, streets and other buildings –

³ i.e. the idea that there should be enough (for a good life) for everybody, too much (quantities of matter and energy use that are unsustainable for nobody; see Bohnenberger, 2021; Monbiot, 2021).

and that therefore physical transformations should actually be reduced to a minimum (Heikkurinen, 2019). Therefore, utopian scenarios of change which imagine a diffuse change of the physical reality we live in, might be highly contradictory in terms of energy and resource use (Xue, 2014). Even if degrowth needs a utopian dimension, in this sense, they should be thought of as a 'metamorphosis in being' (Heikkurinen, 2019) or a re-inhabitation of existing geographies (Krähmer, 2022) and perhaps stick closer to 'real utopias' (Wright, 2013) and context-specific characteristics of geographies, rather than imagining radical physical transformations of space.

Developing pathways, policies and strategies for change

Another, different approach is process-oriented. Here, researchers try to imagine pathways towards desirable scenarios (which might be more or less shaped by elements of utopian imaginaries, the scaling up of good practices and learning from errors made), trying to systematize principles, policies and strategies of change needed to achieve the desired transformation. This can focus on one principle and/or one theme or be the attempt to think in complex scenarios of change. This approach is based on a more nuanced back-and-forth between the empirical analysis of existing policies and strategies and the analysis of their limits and more hypothetical attempts to juxtapose the potential outcomes of different combinations of policies or the addition of different strategic goals to change the outcomes of policies in a degrowth perspective.

Examples for such an approach are Lamker's and Schulze Dieckhoff's (2019) theses on post-growth planning, Savini's (2019, 2021) reflections on how to get from one system of values in planning practice to another one, Krähmer's and Cristiano's (Krähmer and Cristiano, 2022) discussion of principles of transformation of cities beyond growth (reuse, sufficiency, sharing) and Brokow-Loga's and Krähmer's (2024) case for solidary degrowth spaces. Savini (2021), for instance, defines current regimes of land management and planning as characterised by the principles of economic competition between places, an ideology of land scarcity and zoned property rights. He proposes to substitute them with the principles of habitability, finity and a polycentric autonomism. Pizzo (2021)

focuses on the role of ground rent as critical component of urban economic growth and suggests reviewing conceptions of land ownership to effectively contest its private appropriation. Bohnenberger (2021) and Schneider *et al.* (2013) have tried to discuss such pathways more specifically for the field of housing policies, also trying to operationalize the concept of sufficiency to reconcile social and ecological goals. Cattaneo *et al.* (2022) propose a discussion of mobility options in urban contexts, emphasizing the importance of overcoming the lock-in effect of car-dependent infrastructures.

In theory this approach appears as particularly apt to do research on the spatialities of degrowth in a way which is both oriented at change that effectively departs from the existing reality and is sufficiently anchored in it, to avoid the risk of being pure fantasy. The problems here probably lie in the details: in this sort of modeling exercises only those considerations which are known can enter in play but, since infinitely complex systems are involved, there will be always elements out of sight and there may be unforeseen forms of interplay between different parts of complex policy proposals as well as bottom-up transformative actions. There is, finally, no possibility to foresee with certainty the outcomes of the application of such proposals of change, the only possibilities remain the critical theoretical assessment of these proposals and the empirical study of experimental applications.

Conclusions: for a pluralism of phronetic research in dialogue

This short paper has tried to expose some initial reflections on how the difficult task of doing useful scientific research on something that does not yet exist – degrowth and its spatialities – has been tackled in the literature. The goal has been to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of four different research methodologies (which is most likely a not exhaustive categorization). While these reflections could be developed in a much more systematic manner, considering both the literature reviewed and the connection to existing debates on theories of knowledge and methodologies in social sciences, it is possible to suggest at least a few concluding remarks. In the first place, it is useful to note that a sort of gradient emerges between the more evidently ‘scientific’ approach of studying the empirical

reality and the borderline realm of developing utopian scenarios of alternatives. This gradient relates to a tension between how much the relative approach is actually able to build the grounds for the systemic transformation of our socio-economic reality (and the need for such a systemic transformation is empirically very well-grounded) and how much, on the other hand, it is able to respect the criteria of rigorous scientific work. Here it is also important to reflect on the notion of science employed: if social science is understood as 'phronetic', that is, as having the goal of producing useful knowledge for the challenges of society (Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram, 2012), and if it is to be critical of the existing social reality (Gregory *et al.*, 2011:123–124), then, in the context of degrowth, it is crucial to develop theories of different realities and theories of change that transcend the possibilities of pure empiricism. The challenge rather is to produce and guarantee continuous dialogue between the critical empirical research of both desirable and problematic aspects of the contemporary reality of cities and territories and between the imagination of pathways to different realities. In this sense, there is not one methodology scrutinized here which is *per se* better than the other. They have different advantages and disadvantages; rather it would be important to increase the dialogue between these different forms of research and to further a continuous triangulation (Ivi, 458) between different methodologies and methods. Furthermore, it could be fruitful to reflect on approaches which have so far been missing: while, for instance, there have been numerous place-specific case studies on good practices or the critical analysis of existing policies, there are only very isolated attempts (e.g. Ruiz-Alejos and Prats, 2022 on degrowth planning scenarios in the Swedish town of Södertälje) to develop complex scenarios of change for specific places. Also, as Kaika *et al.* (2023) note, so far limited attention has been paid to the processes of urbanisation rather than to urbanised places.

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