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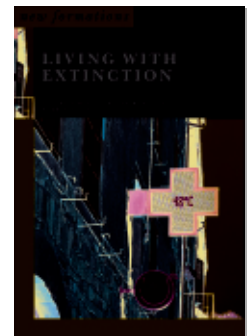
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The Unanticipated Pleasures of the Future: Degrowth,  
Post-Growth and Popular Cultural Economies

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# THE UNANTICIPATED PLEASURES OF THE FUTURE: DEGROWTH, POST-GROWTH AND POPULAR CULTURAL ECONOMIES

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*Mark Banks*

**Abstract:** A renewed theory of ‘degrowth’ has recently emerged from different streams of political economy, ecological economics and environmental activism. Yet contemporary degrowth (and post-growth) has yet to develop any credible or inclusive theory of cultural production, art or aesthetics. A key challenge, as I see it, is to generate a progressive degrowth project that can not only more equitably share and sustain scarce resources, but also retain some sense of organised cultural production as a source of different aesthetic, symbolic and communicative needs and desires. This, I would argue, must include tastes and preferences that are rooted in shared and globally extensive forms of popular culture. The aim here, therefore, is to conceive of a degrowth perspective that might begin to imagine forms of genuinely sustainable and organised cultural economy that strive to accommodate and expand (rather than deny or frustrate) the widest array of human needs and desires in any ecologically-challenged future.

**Keywords:** *degrowth, post-growth, cultural economy, popular culture, organisation, aesthetics*

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## INTRODUCTION

Most exponents of ‘degrowth’ and ‘post-growth’ propose that consumer capitalism must now end – or at least be significantly curtailed – if human societies are to be equitably sustained. Here, the cultural industries and wider ‘creative economy’ play an important, if somewhat implicit, role. As part of the broader apparatus of the consumer society, the industrially organised manufacture, circulation, mediation, consumption and disposal of ‘mass’ and popular cultural commodities tends to be regarded as confirmation of capitalism’s material degeneracy. For many, the spiritual and psychological poverty occasioned by consumerism – a fantasia of false needs and failed hopes – is further evidence of the need to reject this economy of delinquent tastes.

This article is broadly sympathetic to the degrowth critique and certainly I, like many others, have argued that the capitalist cultural industries are now deeply implicated in the advancement of ecological crisis.<sup>1</sup> Much needs to be done to reign in the excesses of cultural and media industry corporations –

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1. Mark Banks, ‘Creative Economy, Degrowth and Aesthetic Limitation’, in K. Oakley and M. Banks (eds) *Cultural Industries and the Environmental Crisis*, 2020, Springer, pp11-25; Graham Murdock, ‘Media Materialities: For a Moral Economy of Machines’, *Journal of Communication*, 68:2, 2018, pp359-368; Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, ‘Greening Cultural Policy’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23:2, 2017, pp174-185.

the impacts of which continue to be under-estimated and under-researched.<sup>2</sup> However, the assumption that because consumer capitalism must end then both an organised cultural economy *and* the plurality of popular tastes they sustain must also end is, I believe, contestable. I think we can challenge this assumption on three grounds – none of which will be unfamiliar to students of cultural studies.

Firstly, the forceful reduction of the cultural economy to *only* a symbolic and material expression of the commodifying excesses of consumer capitalism exerts a crude violence against both practices of cultural production and the possessors of the tastes that animate them. Secondly, the idea that current systems of (especially) mass and popular cultural production and consumption stimulate or express only false or aberrant desires, that have no place in the future, is similarly contentious. Thirdly, we can argue that the degrowth and post-growth theorists' disdain towards popular cultural formations is premised on a false normative opposition of the innate goods supposedly proffered by 'slow', 'local', and 'sustainable' cultural forms set against the (assumedly) unsustainable self- and world-destructive pleasures of a vulgar and commodified mass.

Accordingly, in this article, I argue for the possibility and political necessity of both organised and popular cultural production<sup>3</sup> flourishing in any future degrowth or post-growth societies. I do so, firstly, by demonstrating the potential that, even in degrowth, 'other cultural economies are possible'. By this I mean that genuinely sustainable cultural production of different institutional complexity and scale is both a viable option and likely requirement of any degrowth future. Secondly, in contrast to most degrowth theory, I suggest we can identify authentically (rather than inauthentically) meaningful aesthetic experiences within popular taste that any future egalitarian society ought to consider at least potentially worthy of support. Thirdly, I identify some limitations in degrowthers' idealised projections of the cultural practices of the future, which – as well as being somewhat classed and otherwise exclusionary – are also less intrinsically sustainable and degrowth than tends to be assumed. My overall aim is to intimate the need for the vital sustainment of diverse and globally extensive economies of cultural production, since I believe such economies will be crucial for supporting inclusive and democratic transitions to any mooted arrangement of degrowth states.

To note in advance, most of what I will discuss is quite deliberately focussed on the advanced capitalist economies of the Global North – the most ecologically destructive societies that are argued to require the most extensive and immediate change. This is not to deny the need to consider the ways in which other (less affluent) societies are also deeply implicated in advanced consumer capitalism (most often as sites of exploitation, domination or disadvantage) but to focus initial attention on rich societies where degrowth arguments and principles are being most strongly advocated. The underlying and working presumption, however, is that – regardless of their specific size

2. Toby Miller, 'Immigration and Climate Change Might Just Matter More than Getting that Next Grant', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23:6, 2020, pp970-988.

3. Popular culture is understood here as not simply culture produced by different publics in response to their own social conditions, but also the diverse pleasures and tastes afforded by many kinds of (hitherto) mass or industrially-produced symbols, aesthetics and communicative forms.

4. Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (eds), *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, Routledge, 2015. (Hereafter *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*.); Federico Demaria, Francois Schneider, Filka Sekulova and Joan Martinez-Alier, 'What is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement', *Environmental Values* 22, 2013, pp191-215. (Hereafter *What is Degrowth?*); Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth, Agenda*, 2018 (Hereafter *Degrowth*.); Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*, Polity, 2009 (Hereafter *Farewell to Growth*.); Susan Paulson, 'Degrowth: Culture, Power and Change', *Journal of Political Ecology*, 24, 2017, pp425-446 (Hereafter *Culture, Power and Change*.).

5. Giorgos Kallis, Federico Demaria and Giacomo D'Alisa, 'Introduction: Degrowth', in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, p4.

6. Serge Latouche, 'Can the Left Escape Economism?', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 23:1, 2012, pp74-78, p77.

7. Samuel Alexander, 'Simplicity', in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, pp133-137.

or scope – any such economies will need to be organised foundationally on non-capitalist, egalitarian and democratic principles that eschew exploitative international relations and unjust global dependencies.

## DEGROWTH (AND POST-GROWTH)

In recent years, the notion of 'degrowth' has provided a point of confluence for critical perspectives drawn from many different streams of political economy, ecological economics and environmental activism.<sup>4</sup> However, in calling for an end to economism and the abolition of growth as a social objective, proponents of degrowth tend to share some common visions of a future society 'where everything will be different'.<sup>5</sup> The degrowth transition, it is argued, will be marked by 'frugal abundance';<sup>6</sup> a society of sharing based on enhanced care for the commons, and a genuine ecological sustainability. The bonds of inequality and oppression will be lifted in a world committed to a radical redistribution of an already sufficient plenitude. Liberated from the ceaseless demands of commodity production and the growth imperative, people will find time to 'do more with less' since compensation for the end of capitalist time is the re-emergence of autonomous time dedicated to life itself. In a world of genuinely sustainable economic forms, based on locally oriented production, 'voluntary simplicity'<sup>7</sup> and where 'conviviality' has a principal status, the opportunity will arise to expend social surpluses on a more meaningful range of life-affirming activities. As I write, the application of degrowth in advanced capitalist societies remains somewhat more theoretical than actual. However, degrowth ideas have also started to appear more frequently in mainstream policy and public discourse.<sup>8</sup> The closely aligned idea of 'post-growth' is also gaining visibility and traction.<sup>9</sup> While degrowth and post-growth theories are very similar, they are not identical. However, because they do demonstrate close resemblances in their approach to the theorisation of culture and cultural production, hereafter, for convenience, I will use the term 'degrowth' generally when referring to both degrowth and post-growth theory.

## THE PROBLEM OF CULTURE IN DEGROWTH

What role does culture play in theories of degrowth? Certainly, for some, degrowth should fundamentally be understood as a distinctively cultural (rather than economic) phenomenon – but mostly in an abstract sense. For Serge Latouche, one of the movement's pioneers, degrowth is at 'foremost a cultural revolution',<sup>10</sup> to be expressed in the principled rejection of ideologies of growth and in ardent opposition to the consumer society. Similarly, Susan Paulson has proposed the need for a new cultural paradigm: 'What we need ... is not just a quantitative decrease in production and consumption, but something much more radical: a cultural transformation that re-establishes

livelihoods, relationships and politics around a new suite of values and goals' (*Culture, Power and Change*, p430).

Likewise, for others, the abandonment of economism is predicated on a culture critique that prioritises the necessity of forging 'new values, new sensibilities and new ways of knowing' (*Degrowth*, p146). I would agree that such change is necessary. However, I would argue that degrowth also lacks cultural *specificity* – in terms of offering any detailed projection or examination of the concrete cultural practices that might shape or animate degrowth societies. For example, degrowth has yet to produce an analysis of how any 'new values' might be empirically grounded or *lived* – that is, encouraged to take root (or prevented from doing so) in any specific (or named) social, geographical and cultural milieu. Nor do we know how such values might (at least theoretically) be cultivated or expressed in different forms of (say) media, popular culture, art or aesthetics. Of course, we should not necessarily expect a movement rooted in the natural or political sciences to foreground any kind of cultural analysis (just as cultural studies has tended not to focus primarily on matters of economic degrowth) and it is important to acknowledge that all disciplinary terrains have their ranges and limits. However, it is also relevant to our purpose to observe that the foundational texts – ostensibly concerned with transformations in the productive base of societies – say very little about how any existing or future practices of *cultural* production will be resourced, assembled or distributed. In what follows, I therefore want to focus more precisely on why degrowth has been so reluctant to conceptualise the future possibilities of an organised cultural economy – and why this might be a problem for theorising egalitarian societies of frugal abundance.

## THE CULTURAL ECONOMIES OF DEGROWTH

In degrowth thought, a reluctance to project any future notions of organised cultural production might derive from the fact that cultural industries have tended hitherto to be cast as vanguard agents of capitalism and the consumer society. Regarded as inveterate producers of 'false needs', 'positional goods' and 'conspicuous consumption', cultural industries seem to generate only anxiety, disenchantment and inequality, while also exacerbating extractions, pollutions and wastes. Given the growing evidence of the social and environmental damages wrought by cultural industry corporations and mass consumer culture, this position seems quite well justified.

Yet, so tainted is cultural production by generalised associations with consumer capitalism, degrowthers tend to argue that culture itself needs to be decoupled from *any* idea of extensive or industrially-organised production. Thus, we find where the possibility of cultural production *is* imagined, it tends to be reduced to providing only for the smallest and most contingent forms of a localised subsistence, a position exemplified here by Jason Hickel:

8. EEA, 'Growth without Economic Growth', 2022, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/growth-without-economic-growth>; Bella Webb, 'Degrowth: The Future that Fashion Has Been Looking For?', *Vogue Business*, 27 January 2022.

9. Kate Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism*, Verso, 2020. (Hereafter *Post-Growth Living*); Tim Jackson, *Post Growth: Life After Capitalism*, Polity, 2020. (Hereafter *Post Growth*.)

10. Serge Latouche, 'Imaginary, Decolonisation of' in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, pp117-120, p119.

[W]ith more free time people would be able to have fun, enjoy conviviality with loved ones, cooperate with neighbours, care for friends and relatives, cook healthy food, exercise and enjoy nature, thus rendering unnecessary the patterns of consumption that are driven by time scarcity. And opportunities to learn and develop new skills such as music, maintenance, growing food and crafting furniture would contribute to local self-sufficiency.<sup>11</sup>

11. Jason Hickel, 'Degrowth: A Theory of Radical Abundance', *Real-World Economics Review*, 2019, pp54-66, p66.

In such formulations culture tends also to be idealised as a quasi-autonomous, 'spiritual' realm (*Post-Growth Living*, p143), that only requires rescuing from the economy to re-establish its more natural status as a source of benign and convivial pleasures. In Giorgios Kallis's *Degrowth* (2018), culture is imagined as best contained in forms of 'play, art and philosophy' that allow us to 'unthink' and so 'liberate ourselves from the burdensome pursuit of meaning' (p123).

The desire to decouple culture from any kind of formal, instrumental or organised purpose underpins Kallis's further argument to sequester activities of culture, arts, sports and leisure to the realm of what are termed 'unproductive expenditures'. Here, the aim appears to be to remove some (or all) of culture from the domain of formal or mass production and to divest production of the profit motive – i.e. to render culture as 'unproductive' in terms of a non-contribution to capitalist accumulation. Thus, in Kallis's idealised future: 'A greater portion of [surplus] will be directed to unproductive expenditures that slow down the economy, and a greater share of these unproductive expenditures will be collective: festivals and carnivals, an expansion of the humanities, Dionysian festivals or unprofessional Olympic Games' (*Degrowth*, p121). Kallis also includes projective references to the widespread provision of more 'popular feasts, philosophy or leisure' (*Degrowth*, p11). Such stipulations are consistent with degrowthers' concerns to expand activities 'which are fundamental to one's well-being, such as social relations, political participation, physical exercise, spirituality and contemplation' (*What is Degrowth?*, p22), and that are regarded as best placed beyond the purview of the productive economy.

I would certainly agree that a more spiritual and convivial relation to culture might be one desirable outcome of a degrown society, as would a reduction in work, and more time dedicated to purposeless and 'unproductive' culture and leisure. Clearly, it is also important to move on from the prevailing idea of culture as purely in *service* to the economy. Furthermore, an increase in local craft production and cultural 'self-sufficiency' will doubtless be vital to any degrowth arrangements. But I also want to take issue with the somewhat limited terms in which culture generally, and any future economy of cultural production, are being currently conceptualised in degrowth thinking:

First, what is lacking is a robust and diverse sense of culture as a dynamic and complex anthropology. Culture is the ever-evolving world of practices, symbols and meanings – 'the medium in which humans live their lives'.<sup>12</sup> As

12. John Clammer, *Cultures of Transition and Sustainability: Culture after Capitalism*, Palgrave, 2016, p12. (Hereafter *Cultures of Transition*.)

the source and carrier of our identities, values and beliefs, culture is not just the means for our convivial self-expression, but the focus for our political struggles. It is therefore much more than just a residual space reserved only for benign, disinterested or 'spiritual' contemplation, or one that divests us from 'the burdensome pursuit of meaning'.

Secondly (and most pertinent here), we note the imagined role for culture in any future economy of degrowth remains somewhat idealised, and narrowly conceived. In reserving culture to the domain of 'unproductive expenditures', but failing to specify how this culture might be produced or organised, I would suggest Kallis (and others) risk throwing out the economic baby with the capitalist bathwater. Most of the culture consumed in advanced capitalist societies is produced by some form of industrial or manufactured process rather than spontaneously generated through convivial relations. Part of the degrowth argument is to precisely make this point – and to agitate for a shift to the conditions of the latter. However, while capitalist culture-making corporations might be a justifiable target of degrowthers' ire, the wider cultural industries are a much more diverse constituency. In their existing precincts we already find an array of differently instituted economic organisations and relations that pertain to the production of culture – some more or less capitalist, others not capitalist at all.

So, while, undoubtedly, it is important to oppose capitalist corporations and the toxic infrastructures they command, and to challenge the more growth-driven and ecologically damaging sectors of the 'creative economy', we must also recognise the simultaneous co-existence of other kinds of diverse, mixed and geographically extensive practices of cultural industries production. Closer examination reveals these to be the fertile source for many potentially useful and transferable models and practices for building a more genuinely sustainable, multi-scale and multi-agency cultural economy, animated by progressive forms of ecological politics. This includes a rich variety of larger and medium-sized public and private institutions, transnational cultural organisations, networks and platforms, through to third sector, non-profit, trust, charity or voluntary organisations, all the way down to the local co-operative, assembly or collective.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while in degrowth it might be desirable to limit some forms of industrial or organised cultural production and to support the expansion of non-instrumental cultural practices, we do not necessarily need to do this *in toto*. Culture should be regarded as neither intrinsically local nor spontaneous, or inevitably corrupted by economic relations, but to contain the ambivalent potential for generating 'productive' activities of different variety and kind. But how to recognise, accommodate and make genuinely sustainable transformations within this economic variety, and so create worlds that permit cultural variety to continue to exist, both locally and beyond, does not yet seem a degrowth priority.

Certainly, degrowth theorists have argued persuasively for the need to expand the array of localised, non-marketised or non-commodified cultural

13. Bastian Lange and Hans-Joachim Bürkner, 'Ambiguous Avant-gardes and their Geographies: On Blank Spots of the Postgrowth Debate', *Journal of the Geographical Society of Berlin*, 152:4, 2021, pp273-287; Carl Grodach, Justin O'Connor and Chris Gibson, 'Manufacturing and Cultural Production: Towards a Progressive Policy Agenda for the Cultural Economy', *City, Culture and Society*, 10, 2017, pp17-25; David Boyle and Kate Oakley, *Co-operatives in the Creative Industries*, Co-operatives UK, 2018; Dick Netzer, 'Non-Profit Organisations', in *Handbook of Cultural Economics* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition), R. Towse and T. Navarrete Hernández (eds), Elgar, 2020, pp379-391; Justin O'Connor, 'Art, Culture and the Foundational Economy', Reset Working Paper, 2022, <https://resetartsandculture.com/resources/>. (Hereafter *Art, Culture*.)



practices, as well as DIY cultural production, community arts initiatives and suchlike. But while I would agree that such activities will need to expand, I would also suggest their profound insufficiency. The most advanced theories of the degrown society now need require a more complex understanding of the multipart role played by the arts, media and cultural economy. Few propose any understanding of the spheres of cultural exchange that go beyond the exercise of voluntary simplicity in a restricted local field. Indeed, the idea of culture understood as non-local institutions, organisations, or as extensive public goods – such as might be provided or managed by state or government, or other public or community entities, or be produced and circulated at scale by different private, commercial (but not necessarily capitalist) organisations or not-for-profit companies or collectives – is entirely absent. The degrowth theorists’ advocacy for more effective and direct forms of democracy has yet to extend to consideration of how degrown societies might organise (say) for the sustainable provision of a national public broadcaster, or high-quality environmental journalism, or a viable film industry, or an international arts scene. Indeed, we have very little sense of how *any* shared or common cultural experiences might be engendered or sustained beyond the immediate locality in any prototypical degrown society.

This is an important lacuna in degrowth theory – and needs to be addressed. I would say so firstly because it is highly unlikely that degrowth can ever eliminate the unique need for humans to express and *extend* themselves in and through culture or through attendant forms of cultural production (*Cultures of Transition*). The creation and cultivation of cultural goods, as well as their expression and exchange in different communicative or aesthetic realms, is tightly conjoined with peoples’ innate desires to learn, and to develop and their own personal or social capabilities. Even in the most restricted and localised cultural milieu it is unlikely that people could do without some reflexive, developmental and socially extensive system of provisioning that might allow for different kinds of cultural production, innovation and exchange. As Raymond Williams once wrote ‘a good living culture is various and changing’<sup>14</sup> – and tends often to exceed any social or geographical boundaries that might be imposed upon it. This is not to endorse the idea of culture as agent of continued economic ‘growth’ – but to recognise that human life is active, dynamic and future-oriented and so it is implausible to think that culture can ever be fixed, contained (or fully de-economised) in the terms degrowthers currently imagine. A second reason we will need a new or residually extended and integrated cultural economy is because, without it, how at any point would we even *know* whether our planetary ecosystems, our fellow citizens – or even we ourselves – were flourishing or suffering in a degrown world? Without systems and infrastructures that might allow for different kinds of trans-territorial communicative and aesthetic production and exchange we would have no relational sense of how we, or others were faring – and so no means of judging how best to live or act together, locally,

14. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Pelican, 1975 (1961), p364.



democratically, or in the common global interest.<sup>15</sup> Thus, some form of organised cultural economy, which I define as a *variegated and extensive system of producing and provisioning for aesthetic, symbolic and communicative exchange*, will surely be required to help make comprehensible both the experience and the examination of any future sustainable life.

The erstwhile omission of such considerations might well be consistent with theories of ‘voluntary simplicity’ but they seem somewhat remiss given the common global challenges we will undoubtedly more frequently face. Even in degrown societies, there will likely be both demand and requirement for a diversity of cultural, arts and media institutions and material forms of organisation that both mediate and connect some remaining part of the already existing global economy of cultural goods, symbols and information, and that can help create and associate socially necessary future kinds of cultural objects, relations and experiences. Doubtless some existing and future culture professionals might also want to make a fair living from organised cultural production – which might also necessitate some different varieties and scales of economic organisation. But we do not yet know what these degrown cultural industries might or could look like or how a real, integrated and ecologically sustainable cultural economy might be made to function. We can assuredly propose, however, that such an economy would most likely need to operate as some kind of publicly and democratically approved *system* of cultural production, provisioning and exchange; one that would undoubtedly be required – through both desire and necessity – to move beyond the archipelago of convivial localities.

## DEGROWTH AND POPULAR CULTURE

The argument that degrowth might need to develop a more advanced theory of culture and cultural economy is not simply practical or technical, but also political. It is premised on a belief that it is in our social and democratic interests to ensure the widest possible array of sustainable cultural forms can flourish in any ecologically challenged future. This includes both locally ‘self-sufficient’ and ‘unproductive’ cultures, as well as cultures that might remain more ‘productive’, variegated and extensive. The challenge is not how to reduce culture to some locally prescribed or specified limits – but how to allow for the greatest range of sustainable pleasures to be made available to the greatest number, assuming a foundationally non-capitalist system, while also widening opportunities for democratic and political participation in and through the cultural sphere.

I also want to argue now that such a perspective must also include a commitment to *popular* culture. While capitalism has, of course, significantly contributed to the production of popular culture (with much corollary ecological damage), capitalism is not a necessary condition for its existence. I want to argue here that while capitalist consumer culture must be brought

15. This is not to disclaim the vital and valid existence of various self-determined, local or indigenous societies and cultures that might – for many different reasons – remain disconnected from such a cultural-economic apparatus, but to indicate that this is unlikely to be the case or desire for the majority.

to an effective end, shared, extensive and trans-territorial forms of popular culture need not, and, indeed, *should* not. In the degrown future, it is not only localised and restricted forms of popular culture that will be required, but shared, mediated and globally extensive forms of popular culture, too.

Partly, degrowth theory has opposed industrialised forms of cultural production because the necessary infrastructures and material throughputs required to deliver such goods can seem incompatible with any society of voluntary simplicity. Yet, also, and just as commonly, mass or popular culture tends to be regarded as the very *moral* antithesis of the kinds of convivial and authentic culture degrowthers consider necessary to cultivate for human survival and flourishing. Here, not only is organised popular cultural production regarded as ecologically destructive, it is seen to encourage errant desires – such as materialism, acquisitiveness, competitiveness and status-seeking. No good can come from popular consumption – so it need not be sustained.

For writers such as Tim Jackson and Kate Soper, the degraded nature of popular consumption is self-evident. Jackson's *Post Growth* (2020), with its steely focus on breaking the 'iron cage of consumerism' (p91), is deeply negative about popular consumption – and, indeed, consumers. Dazzled by 'glitter and bling' consumers spend their money on 'fast cars, fast food, fast sex, fast fashion', seduced by the promise of an earthly paradise that delivers only shame, dissatisfaction and a 'constant craving' (*Post Growth*, p90, p91, p163). While, in Jackson's book, consumers tend to appear as passive and non-discerning, for Soper, it is rationally discerning consumers themselves who have now started to recognise the limits and dangers of mass consumption. In *Post-Growth Living* (2020) she emphasises how consumer capitalism is not simply ecologically unsustainable, but is also becoming recognised as more joyless and unfulfilling, even for those whose needs it seems most well-designed to serve: '... consumerism is today being questioned not only because of its ethical and environmental consequences, but because of its negative effects on affluent consumers themselves, and the way it distrains on sensual pleasure and more spiritual forms of well-being' (p44).

Soper argues that it is the richest or most 'affluent disaffected' populations of the Global North that are setting the pace in seeking out new and more authentic existential satisfactions. She therefore locates the catalyst for a wider political change in the 'disenchantments of consumers themselves' (*Post-Growth Living*, p4). Outlining her theory of 'alternative hedonism', Soper argues that progressive change is therefore best occasioned, not by petitions to social altruism, or finger-wagging, but by appeals to self-interest. Soper's political vision is premised on the potential for stressed and jaded consumers to recognise for themselves the 'self-regarding gratifications of living and consuming differently' (*Post-Growth Living*, p51). The emphasis is not necessarily on asceticism, or aesthetic restraint, but on unlocking the latent pleasures too long foreclosed by capitalist domination.

By harnessing ‘new forms of desire’, Soper argues, progressive parties can focus on increasing the sum of opportunities to live well, partly through ‘proactive green policy initiatives [that] allow emergent structures of feeling to be actualised’ (*Post-Growth Living*, p50, p74). These prefigurative actions will further help consumers to ‘envisage the larger-scale shifts in both experience and policy-making that will be essential in any transition to a sustainable economic order’ (*Post-Growth Living*, p74). The ‘order’ Soper envisages is (perhaps unsurprisingly) one rooted in degrown forms of local, small-scale and craft-based production, more ‘sober’ and ‘spiritual’ consumption, and mindful commitment to a ‘slower pace of living’ (*Post-Growth Living*, p148).

Yet, part of the problem with such perspectives, and degrowth more generally, is that it so obviously fails to acknowledge that popular cultural consumption is, for millions of people, a cherished source of authentic meaning and the well-spring of their deepest and most satisfying pleasures. Notwithstanding its accepted tendency to provoke illusion, or domination, or to stimulate errant desire, popular culture is a source of curiosity, enlightenment and joy, and can provide people with the materials and means for undertaking the fullest and most critical examinations of life. In his recent advocacy for an enhanced role for art and culture in a future ‘foundational economy’, Justin O’Connor approvingly cites the observations of Stefano Harney:

Art is closer to people than at any other time in history. People make and compile music. They design interiors and make-over their bodies. They watch more television and more movies. They think deeply about food and clothes. They write software and surf the net of music videos and play on-line games together ... And with this there is production of subjectivities which are literally fashioned, which are aesthetic, which are created ... There is a massive daily register of judgment, critique, attention and taste.<sup>16</sup>

While this might be taken by degrowthers as evidence of an unbridled consumerist excess, for O’Connor it is interpreted as affirmation of how art and culture (including popular culture) is also a ‘shared social space where meaning, enjoyment, learning and celebration happen, [part of] that which makes us human, part of a common flourishing’ (*Art, Culture*, p63). As Stefanie Graefe further argues, for good or ill, popular culture is also regarded by people as a way of vitally extending themselves:

...most people experience the growth regime not as a form of compulsion or limitation but as an expansion of their possibilities. Most people see taking cheap flights to foreign cities, owning the latest iPhone or – if one can afford it – following the latest design trends not as forms of repression, but as attractive ways in which they can give expression to their individuality, their creativity – their ‘self’.<sup>17</sup>

16. Stefano Harney, ‘Creative Industries Debate: Unfinished Business: Labour, Management, and the Creative Industries’, in M. Hayward (ed.), *Cultural Studies and Finance Capitalism*, Routledge, 2012; *Art, Culture*, p 62.

17. Stefanie Graefe, ‘Subjective Limits to Growth and the Limits to a Lifestyle Oriented Critique of Growth’, in H. Rosa and C. Henning (eds), *The Good Life Beyond Growth*, Routledge, 2018, pp201-212, p204.

The established exponents of degrowth tend to ignore such pleasures – or else regard them as misplaced or aberrant. But while we can agree with degrowthers that seeking gratification for the sovereign ‘self’ is what lies at the heart of consumerist desire (and must seriously be challenged), neither can such desires themselves be dismissed as wholly damaging, invalid or inauthentic. Indeed, if one of the avowed tasks of degrowth is to democratically reinvent society so that people might be freer to choose and make their own culture, then it might need to entertain the prospect of people seeking to retain popular forms that degrowthers themselves would regard as socially delinquent. There is no guarantee that people will ‘voluntarily’ agree to give up social media, television, cinema, pop music, professional sports, fashion, access to world cuisines, international tourism etc., or accept any ostensibly more sustainable, ‘sober’ or restricted variants. It is possible, of course, that through self-choice, education, persuasion, direct legislation, or other enlightened processes of ‘aesthetic revisioning’ (*Post-Growth Living*, p157) certain kinds of cultural goods might necessarily cease to exist. Yet, we cannot assume *all* popular tastes will (or should) so easily be surrendered, or that – even if they are – the pleasures foregone will not provoke some concomitant desires for their substitution or replacement.

#### THEORISING AESTHETIC LOSSES AND GAINS

Another way of conceiving of the range of cultural pleasures the future might deliver is to try and think about the different aesthetic *losses and gains* that might be occasioned by any degrowth transition. This arguably gives us a more concrete way of imagining how to adapt or make structural and institutional changes that can afford or inhibit different kinds of cultural experiences. For most degrowthers, the cultural gains of the future will come in the enlargement of disinterested and unproductive expenditures, a focus on locally restricted production, and the expansion of what are sometimes termed ‘relational goods’ – a culture of sharing and reciprocity rooted in more immediate relations of love, care and mutual respect (see *Degrowth*). The loss will come in the welcome form of the end of consumerism and the commercial mass production of culture with all their attendant exploitations, pollutions and wastes. However, as I now discuss, there have also been small efforts to try to *include* some provision for mass or popular culture in the projected aesthetic pleasures of the degrown future. While this is certainly welcome, it also remains somewhat limited and unconvincing. This is because, as we’ll see, it once again fails to elaborate a theory of how an organised cultural economy might work to sustain any such globally shared or extended popular pleasures, or to consider why such pleasures might be worth saving in the first place.

You will recall that mention has been made by Kallis of the potential future role of degrown local arts, non-professional sports and popular initiatives such as an ‘unprofessional Olympics’. Consider also his further observations

on the role of footballers and artists in a future degrown society:

A Messi should excel in playing football and a Picasso in painting. But there is no reason why Messis and Picassos should accumulate the wealth and power they accumulate today. A Messi can continue to enjoy the prestige of being the best footballer in the world while playing but be a regular guy off the field. Power should be contained within limited realms and not be exchanged with power in all realms (*Degrowth*, p118).

In many ways this is an agreeable projection. In any kind of egalitarian and degrown society wage differentials and wealth accumulation should be made limited and power rightfully checked. And any degrown society might come to accept that practices of football and art are best contained within restricted spheres and pursued for their own participatory purpose, in ways that are mindful of the need for frugality, and non-competition beyond locally restricted limits. Here, our appreciation would no longer need to extend to the creation and veneration of world celebrities or superstars, since these would be relics symbolising the social violence of a now discredited cultural formation. Messi and Picasso would accordingly remain ‘regular guys’ in perpetuity – notwithstanding the reputation they might garner in their own restricted field of renown. We might agree that this is no bad thing – since the dethroning of superstars and the dismantling of any system of recognition and reward that fetishises ‘talent’ and overly attributes wealth and power to individuals (while others barely subsist), is a legitimate egalitarian goal.<sup>18</sup> But we cannot pretend here that we are in some sense retaining or preserving the *same* aesthetic qualities or affordances of a conventional Messi or Picasso. Indeed, what is being proposed by Kallis is something that is both organisationally *and* aesthetically, quite different.

18. Mark Banks, ‘Cultural Work and Contributive Justice’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 2022.

Firstly, in terms of organisation, we might first want to ask how would a Messi or a Picasso come even to *exist*, let alone be recognised and respected as the ‘best in the world’, in a degrown society? World football, like the world art market, has emerged hand-in-hand with technologically advanced and mass-mediated consumer capitalism. The prestige and status (as well as wealth and power) of Messis and Picassos would not exist without the affordances of global capital and the socio-technical apparatus on which it suspends. The trouble we have now is to imagine the creation of any future Messis and Picassos *without* this apparatus. Yet, the voluntary shrinking of society, and the reduction of non-essential, extractive, or non-egalitarian forms of economic activity, would likely require the abolition or abandonment of World Cups or global Biennales in their current form, since the social conditions that are foundational to their sustenance could no longer be defended or sustained. However, some idea of *continuity* is also being implied here by Kallis. Like his invocation of an ‘unprofessional Olympics’, Kallis seems implicitly to presume the existence of some future degrown football tournaments and art

exhibitions for our homespun Messis and Picassos to ‘excel’ in. But precisely how such activities might be economically or structurally occasioned is not specified. Again, the question is one of organisational possibility; what cultural infrastructures and forms of economy will need to exist in the future to allow for Messis and Picassos to thrive and excel, and so become established and recognised as ‘the best in the world’? And how will people come to know or recognise Messis or Picassos – and appreciate their qualities and standards of excellence – in any common or shared way?

Secondly, it is not just a question of how we envisage the prospects for an organised cultural economy, but how we conceive of aesthetic possibility, too. Kallis wants societies to give up mass and commercialised professional football and art in the interest of countering exploitation, reducing inequality and downscaling the throughput of resources. Yet, while these might be laudable goals, it is contestable whether the aesthetic goods these activities currently provide can be maintained or substituted for in the straightforward way Kallis seems to assume. We know, for many millions of people, global professional football is meaningful, affirmative and ‘spiritual’ – in the secular sense of invoking shared feelings of conviviality, community, collective belief and emotional pleasure. It is, in fact, precisely these qualities writ large that makes Messi *appreciable* as a much better player than you or me; it is how we know he is excellent, compared to all others. It is also these shared and meaningful attachments that make the World Cup or Champions’ League a lot more appealing than their Sunday League equivalents – and largely non-substitutable for them. Similarly, the renown of Picasso is premised partly on an economy of prestige that has furnished the growth of the capitalist art market but is also rooted in an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of his work when compared with others in the globally shared space of art appreciation. Therefore, despite public awareness that both world professional football and global art markets are mostly capital-infested, non-egalitarian and ecologically damaging, it is hard to see people readily substituting them for any of the kinds of sober, local or restricted variant that might emerge. Such variants would also inevitably provide much *less* in the way of aesthetic goods because it is precisely the sense of scale, quality and shared participation in the global worlds of football and art that provides for their aesthetic value. Significant aesthetic losses will occur and the standards of excellence in the practice will be diminished if these activities are fully degrown. Of course, these might prove to be socially necessary and justifiable losses. But as we have already discussed, since many millions of people find football and art (and other) popular pleasures both satisfying and authentic, rather than inevitably degraded, instead of assuming all cultural practices will need automatically to be checked or contained, might it be better to ask *which* popular aesthetic experiences might need to be phased out or restricted, as well as which might be retained, transformed, or else replaced by some other kind of sustainably organised but also national and

globally extensive variant?<sup>19</sup> In this we might need to begin from a more honest evaluation of the potential *costs* to the aesthetic commons of the move to more frugal societies divested of larger scale, more globally shared and collective pleasures – and a better (and less prescriptively austere) plan of how to democratically revise, replace or (if necessary) relinquish such pleasures in any society of conviviality.

This is not to defend existing consumer capitalism, the ‘economy of superstars’<sup>20</sup> or to advocate for dubious forms of weak sustainability that might preserve damaging arrangements – but to argue that without some considered thought given to how we might progressively sustain some form of convivial mass or popular culture, or indeed *any* kind of trans-territorial, shared or communal cultural practices, then we cannot assume that their affirmative pleasures will continue to exist, or that we will be able to successfully transfigure them into some equally-valued, local or restricted form. Of course, any genuinely degrown society will have to embrace radical (and we hope, democratic) change – and restrictions on some current cultural practices might seem both desirable and inevitable. But this does not necessarily mean that Messis, Picassos, World Cups and Biennales (or their equivalents) can no longer exist in some globally shared and continuous form, but rather that we might start to theorise how they can be made more genuinely sustainable and egalitarian, while still recognisably pleasurable, for those who wish to enjoy them together across whatever trans-territorial cultural infrastructures we are able to sustainably design or maintain.<sup>21</sup> It might well be through such a process that World Cups and Biennales – and other such pleasures – *are* eventually judged as unsustainable. Indeed, as Ingolfur Blühdorn has repeatedly insisted – *any* such efforts to moderate, ameliorate or transform existing conditions of production and consumption is to be complicit in a ‘culture of denial’<sup>22</sup> and uselessly engaged in ‘sustaining the unsustainable’.<sup>23</sup> But, eschewing this pessimism, perhaps there is also still much to be gained in theorising and working through the specific combinations of socio-systemic innovations, compromises and restrictions that societies might need to make to ensure cultural pleasures are not limited merely to the parochial and restricted pursuit of ‘unproductive’ pastimes and highly circumscribed forms of aesthetic self-sufficiency. The pleasures of the future – however they will be configured – remain open-ended and emergent, and should not be so clearly anticipated, prescribed or disclaimed.<sup>24</sup> And, as I’ve already argued, it is also likely to be a democratic requirement and demand that we *create* dynamic systems of cultural production and exchange that retain the possibility of shared and communal experiences, and comprehensible transfers of cultural knowledge across social boundaries and at different geographical scales, when the supreme urgency of global crisis will surely encourage and necessitate the pursuit of a greater and more mutual set of intercultural understandings, communications and connections.

19. For example, how much better would it have been if the 2022 World Cup in Qatar – a multipart ecological disaster – had been the point at which the current social and environmental sustainability of the World Cup was brought into serious question for the first time?

20. Sherwin Rosen, ‘The Economics of Superstars’, *The American Economic Review*, 71:5, 1990, pp845-58.

21. Damian White, ‘Just Transitions/Design for Transitions: Preliminary Notes on a Design Politics for a Green New Deal’, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 31:2, 2020, pp20-39.

22. Ingolfur Blühdorn, ‘Post-Capitalism, Post-Growth, Postconsumerism? Eco-political Hopes Beyond Sustainability’, *Global Discourse*, 7:1, 2017, pp42-61, p43.

23. Ingolfur Blühdorn, ‘Sustaining the Unsustainable: Symbolic Politics and the Politics of Simulation’, *Environmental Politics*, 16:2, 2007, pp251-275, p269.

24. Jeremy Gilbert, *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism*, Pluto, 2014. Mareile Pfannebecker and J.A. Smith, *Work Want Work: Labour and Desire at the End of Capitalism*, Zed, 2020.



## THE LIMITS OF SLOW

I have already discussed how degrowth theory exhibits a strong preference for locally self-sufficient, restricted and ‘unproductive’ forms of cultural production over more organised, industrialised, mass or popular variants. These preferences tend also to be assumed as intrinsically and ethically good. For example, Jackson is a strong advocate for the attention one might devote to meditative engagement with the ‘slow’ production of the material crafts, or the crafted arts of music and literature, or by working in nature, which is judged innately to generate the deepest and most enduring of existential gratifications. For Soper also, even though she wishes clearly to avoid invoking a ‘puritan disdain’ in her judgment, the ‘pleasures of art, craft and sociable living’ are favourably endorsed, and the desire for ‘fast’ living through social media, screens, cheap foreign holidays and high-speed travel disavowed (*Post-Growth Living*, p145-6). The preference of more ‘sober and spiritual’ (*Post-Growth Living*, p144) cultural activities is of course premised on some significant downsizing (or the sanctioned abandonment) of relations of popular cultural production and consumption. Yet, as has been frequently observed, there is an exclusionary politics that underpins much of the advocacy for slow, ethical or sustainable economies – part of a bourgeois ‘eco-habitus’ that valorises its own middle-class tastes and more readily ‘awards distinction to those who can easily engage in green consumption’.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the main problem, however, isn’t so much that Jackson’s or Soper’s pleasures aren’t good, but that they simply assume they are innately good for *everyone*, and equally discount that the pleasures of popular consumption (or the existence any kinds of popular cultural economy) can ever be good for anyone.

However, while social ‘shrinkage’ and going ‘slow’ might well be processes we come necessarily to accept, it is important to note also that the kinds of self-sufficient cultural practices so valued by degrowth theorists might be not quite as intrinsically degrown or sustainable as is often claimed. As critics have recently identified, pursuit of more restricted living does not necessarily lead to less consumption, but often to the creation of new markets and taste publics for various ‘green’ commodities and forms of ‘lifestyle minimalism’ geared to the pursuit of social distinction.<sup>26</sup>

While varieties of green and eco-living are on the rise, degrowthers would no doubt argue that most of the current and prefigurative forms of ‘slow’ living and lifestyle production are simply insufficiently austere or restrained. They would say the future will require a much fuller embrace of decommodification and de-materialised living – and wholesale abandonment of any kind of commitment to conspicuous consumption. Current tendencies cannot be taken to stand as the limits of degrowth potential, it would doubtless be said. This might well be the case. But we know that even in the most comprehensively degrown societies, consumption is unavoidable. The slowest, most restricted and degrown

25. Emily Huddart-Kennedy and Jennifer Givens ‘Eco-habitus or Eco-powerlessness? Examining Environmental Concern across Social Class,’ *Sociological Perspectives*, 2019, pp1-22, p3.

26. Miriam Meissner, ‘Against Accumulation: Lifestyle Minimalism, Degrowth and the Present Post-Ecological Condition’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 12:3, 2019, pp185-200, p195-6.

forms of life are not non-consuming – since they rely on resources, infrastructures and social relations that are only potentially and relatively (rather than intrinsically and absolutely) more sustainable than their ‘faster’, more extensive, or mass or industrially produced counterparts. What we need therefore for *all* forms of consumption is a commitment to exploring the numerous ways in which sustainable patterns can be instanced (and where they cannot), and not to take for granted any claims to superiority made on behalf of any putatively ‘degrown’ or ‘slow’ cultural production. All forms of cultural production – local, global, slow, fast, craft-based or manufactured at scale – must be evaluated and reckoned in terms that allow for due consideration of the structural and aesthetic costs and benefits of their continuation, transformation or abandonment.

## CONCLUSION – TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE CULTURAL ECONOMIES

In degrowth, and in climate politics generally, we need a more detailed and inclusive conversation about how to responsibly sustain organised systems of cultural production, consumption and exchange. Such a broad public conversation should not automatically be premised on cultural assumptions that privilege the middle-class habitus, but consider also the wider and more globally extensive economy of pleasures and institutions that make up the cultural field. This is not to assert the simple observation that bourgeois academics (or activists) might have bourgeois tastes, but to make the wider point that any command of the degrown cultural economy and its aesthetic imaginaries must be made more genuinely inclusive, convivial and collective.

What might help in developing this conversation is for degrowthers to more readily accept that while, broadly speaking, the mass or popular cultural industries *are* unsustainable in their current form, they are also valued by millions of people in ways that are not intrinsically aberrant, illusory or degraded. They are, in fact, the source of some aesthetic experiences that might potentially be worth *saving*. With this acceptance, it would then become an important task for degrowthers and other climate theorists and activists to try to conceive systems for sustainable cultural production that do not simply assume the necessity of eliminating popular or mass cultural tastes and forms, but that explore the possibility of their consensual reconfiguration within the anticipated world of frugal abundance. This would involve conceiving of popular culture as part of the overall set of private or public goods that any common degrown future might progressively cultivate as an ‘essential part of the [political and] social infrastructure [and] a collective contribution to a life in common worth living’ (*Art, Culture*, p164). This is certainly *not* to say that popular tastes are intrinsically good, beyond criticism, and will not – or should not – change. Indeed, since culture is a product of our material

conditions, and the social structures and institutions we inhabit, then it is likely a world of ecological restriction (ideally coupled with a commitment to more egalitarian and socially just production) will tend to transform our cultural practices and tastes in ways that reflect new values and constraints. Yet, since culture is also a product of our imaginations and desires, a source of ideas and narratives, and a way of making sense of structures that are also affordances, then it also seems likely that new and innovative ways might be found to maintain popular pleasures even in the most restrictedly degrown society.

So, looking beyond, what are the specific social and material *conditions* that might allow for the democratic and sustainable production of different kinds of culture in a degrown society? This is not an easy question to answer. In furnishing the possibility for change we will first need to think of cultural production systemically, holistically, and as part of a wider and unfolding global crisis of production in the capitalist system.<sup>27</sup> The alignment of cultural production with established arrangements of destruction, exploitation and oppression would need to be further highlighted and opposed. Capitalist corporations must be foundationally challenged, and ownership and control of cultural production systems will need a radical overhaul. Supporting and creating organisational alternatives must be part of the mix (See *Art, Culture*). Collective, political action – executed in progressive, democratic, likely left-green, parties and popular and emergent transnational cultural movements and agencies<sup>28</sup> – will be required because it is unlikely that simple increases in ecological ‘awareness’<sup>29</sup> and a growing disillusion amongst affluent consumers will be sufficient to catalyse the scale or urgency of the required change. The securing of state(s) power – to help more centrally plan, ameliorate and transform the cultural production system will be necessary – yet this will also need to retain some idea of the autonomous value of culture, as a productive and expressive medium for human extension and exchange. There is no guarantee any of this will happen, but crises and their accelerated unfolding might well focus and energise the potential for change.

Yet, even if we accept hypothetically that an organised cultural economy *might* continue to exist in the unlikely event of some democratic transition to degrowth, it still remains quite difficult to conceive of any complex cultural production system that would not require some distributed and resource-hungry infrastructure. If any shared, common or popular pleasures remained, we would have to work out how to contain them within some agreed and acceptable ecological parameters, as well as find ways to limit any (genuinely) socially destructive desires (while also accommodating ‘improper’ desire, as well as the capacity to do things that might be bad for us). But perhaps the a priori question here is, actually, what forms of *cultural plurality* should we aspire to maintain or develop in any degrown society? And how would we ensure that the ‘cultural revolution’ of degrowth did not unduly restrict or diminish the productive energies of humans and creative cultural possibility, in

27. As Nancy Fraser has argued, acting and thinking ‘trans-environmentally’ means locating cultural politics within its systemic context – for us, seeing cultural production as profoundly implicated in climate struggle, not outside of it. See ‘Climates of Capital’, *New Left Review*, 127, 2021, pp94-127, p97.

28. Minky Worden, ‘The World Cup is Exciting, Lucrative and Deadly’, *Newsweek*, 23 August 2022.

29. Matt Huber, ‘“Awareness” Will Not Save Us from Climate Disaster’, *Jacobin*, 12 May 2022.

the wake of noble attempts to address the very real imperative of maintaining our shared survival? I would propose that one of the priorities of degrowth must be to provide democratic societies with the means to accommodate a complex plurality of cultural forms and desires, including those we would regard as popular, collective and extensive, within whatever necessary and agreed ecological limits we are able to identify. For while there is no doubt that our pleasures might change, some might equally stay the same, and regardless of both, our desire to share them will almost certainly remain.

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