



## Degrowth and the State

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### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a gap in degrowth scholarship: the lack of a theory of the state. Those who write about degrowth advocate radical policy and social change, but have no model to explain how, why and under what conditions such change could come about and what role the state would play in it. This is because they have no theory of what the state is, or when and why it changes. We review for the first time the Anglophone and Francophone literatures on state and degrowth and find both wanting. We propose a Gramscian theory of the state suitable for thinking about degrowth and show with the example of strategizing for a maximum income policy how this suits the degrowth literature's emphasis on a combination of grassroots and institutional actions.

### 1. Introduction

A foundational question for ecological economics is how, and under what conditions, economies may prosper without growth (Jackson, 2008; Victor, 2008). Steady-state, post-growth or degrowth economists may differ on details of their diagnoses. They mostly agree, however, on the policies they want to see: caps, carbon and green taxes, a basic and a maximum income, or working hour reductions (Kallis, 2018). Such reforms, however, would require a radical change of the political and economic system if they were to be implemented (Blawhof, 2012). A theory of ecological-economic political change cannot but deal with the state, a core force in social change (Wright, 2009). Yet the literature on alternatives to growth is moot on the question of the state. The premise of this paper is that unless ecological economists and advocates of post-growth/degrowth develop a theory of what the state is, how it works and how it changes, their proposals speak to the void.

Take for example Tim Jackson's (2008) 'Prosperity without Growth', a most influential work that proved the impossibility of addressing climate change if growth were to continue. Jackson explains the failures of the current political system and offers policy prescriptions like resource caps, green bonds or working time limitations. Jackson however does not discuss who and how will bring such radical green institutions. He recognizes that the neo-liberal state is an obstacle. He advocates a model of governance that puts the public good first. His book, however, started as a report written for the UK government. Like other policy advice it appeals with reason to enlightened policy makers who are supposed to serve the public. What if though, as

Jackson recognizes, the state machinery is not neutral but part and parcel of the pursuit of economic growth? How could change in a post-growth direction come about?

Likewise, Herman Daly's steady state economics is the most comprehensive and consistent policy framework developed by an ecological economist. But when in a recent interview, the interviewer asks Daly 'how a historical transformation would take place', he responds with 'an appeal to morality' because 'purpose is causative in the world.' Purpose is indeed causative, but this does not absolve the scientific question of how social and political systems work and change. Why and how would new morals or values change institutions in the direction of a steady-state? Ecological economists reproduce here the mind-set of mainstream economists who treat political systems as exogenous to their subject matter. But ecological economists give inconvenient and contrarian advice that goes against powerful interests. It is unrealistic to expect that such advice will be realized just by its logical or moral power.

The degrowth literature is not any better than post-growth or steady-state economics. The vocabulary of degrowth that we edited (D'Alisa et al., 2015) had fifty-one entries, but none on the state, a question that we did not touch upon in our introductory chapter. At the time that we were preparing the collection (2012) there was no one that we knew working on the question of the state, a topic outside our own radar back then. It is this gap that we want to address in this paper. We focus on degrowth not only because it is the literature we know best, but also because there has been some engagement within this literature with questions of democracy and political change, questions that

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directly and indirectly touch on the state. We combine a review of the literature on degrowth and the state, following a kindred approach to Ulrich Brand (Görg and Brand, 2003; Lang and Brand, 2015), who has also argued about the relevance of Gramsci's theory of the state when thinking about socio-ecological transformations and degrowth. Our literature review of how the question of the state has been treated in the degrowth literature has a theoretical purpose: to offer a theory of state that not only articulates coherently degrowth practices and policies but also elucidates possible strategies that alliances of scholars, intellectuals, policy makers and practitioners could push forward. We follow Brand (2016a) here in using a theoretical approach with strategic intentions. Our approach is at the interface of political ecology and ecological economics mobilizing a critical theory of the state, in the Gramscian theorization of the integral state.

Our research is part of a broader engagement with the question of transformation, our interest here being on the role of the state. Despite increasing attention to social 'transformations', the related scholarship, including that on degrowth transformations (Asara et al., 2015) has not questioned sufficiently power asymmetries or shed light on structural obstacles (Brand, 2016a, b). The word "transformation" is used mostly to indicate a desired direction, but is analytically weak (Brand, 2016b). To classify transformational strategies, this paper uses the analytical lens of Eric Olin-Wright's model (Wright, 2009),<sup>1</sup> which identifies three logics and visions of systemic transformations: ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic. Each vision is associated with a political tradition, is developed around a pivotal political actor, and has a particular strategic logic with respect to the state. The ruptural strategy consists of a frontal attack on the state, aiming to the construction of new emancipatory institutions after existing state institutions have been dismantled. This is the logic of revolutionaries. Interstitial metamorphosis instead is focused on the promotion of horizontalist alternatives within the crack of the capitalist system, building the new in the cracks (interstices) of the old but outside the state. This strategy is in line with anarchist visions of building parallel systems in the civil society arena around self-management. The strategy of symbiotic metamorphosis envisions a co-evolving trajectory of transformation based on compromises with the dominant political-economic forces. It aspires "to use" the state and mobilize popular power to transform the state apparatus and institutions. This approach is in line with a more reformist social democratic political tradition.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews systematically the degrowth literature on the state using Erik Olin Wright's theory of transformative strategies (Wright, 2009). Subsection 2.1 reviews the Anglophone literature on degrowth and Section 2.2 the Francophone literature on 'décroissance', which includes more advanced debates about the state than its Anglophone counterpart.<sup>2</sup> We started our research studying contributions on degrowth and the state in two seminal publications: in English, a volume on degrowth and democracy published at the journal *Futures* (Cattaneo et al., 2012), and in French, a volume on degrowth and the state published in the journal *Entropia*, the principal journal of the degrowth community in France. We then checked on Scopus and Google Scholar for all papers quoting contributions from these two special issues. Our analysis confirms a paradox first noted by Cosme et al (2017): degrowth authors privilege bottom-up action by the grassroots, but then ask for top-down policy intervention from the state, without however offering a concrete view

on the role of the state. This tension can be resolved with a Gramscian theory of the state, which sees civil and political society as two integral components of the state and its change (section 3). We illustrate with a brief example – a campaign for a maximum income (section 4) - how Gramsci's theory can inform political strategies for degrowth before concluding in section 5 with policy and research implications.

## 2. A literature review of the state and degrowth

### 2.1. The Anglophone literature on state and degrowth

Recent literature surveys show that the understudy of the state within the degrowth literature has not changed since the publication of the degrowth vocabulary (Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017; Kallis et al., 2018). Weiss and Cattaneo (2017) look at Scopus-indexed papers with the word degrowth in their title published from 2006 to 2015. The conceptual essays on degrowth that dominated the early period of research define degrowth and criticize the unsustainability of economic growth. However, they do not address the function of the state in the production of growth-based societies and do not ponder on the role of the state in a hypothetical degrowth transition. Kallis et al. (2018) examine literatures from economics, sociology, anthropology and political science that address topics relevant for degrowth. Even the section of the review on democracy and political futures, however, has no references to possible theories of the state that might help make sense of current changes in liberal or social-democratic states.

Within degrowth studies, there is a stream speculating on the forms of democracy compatible with a hypothetical degrowth society. This stream reflects on both the social materiality of democracy i.e. the domination of capitalist relation that support the contemporary liberal democracy and tend to shrink the relevance of the public debate about the form of appropriation of natural resources; and the biophysical materiality of democracy i.e. the specific form that the liberal democracy has because of its total dependence on growth and cost shifting (Pichler et al., 2018). This literature, however, does not engage with the question of how existing states could be transformed. Indeed some scholars engaged with this literature have complaint for the lack of discussion about the state as an agent of transformation (Zoellick and Bisht, 2018).

Questions about the state were touched upon – indirectly – on a special issue on degrowth and the future of democracy. One finds there authors embracing implicitly an interstitial strategy (Bonaiuti, 2012; Johanishova and Wolf, 2012), but without specifying their approach to the transformation of the state, and others such as Trainer who explicitly call for ignoring the state as an outdated institution in an era of environmental disasters and collapses, where decentralized forms of collective self-organization will naturally emerge and prove superior (Trainer, 2012, 2019). Bonaiuti (2012) argues that a large scale of social metabolism and organization is not compatible with democracy. Democracy in his view requires proximity. Systems that are overtly complex with flows that cannot be comprehended or controlled by those making decisions cannot be democratic. Degrowth, Bonaiuti maintains, requires a smaller-scale cooperative organization. He talks of a theory of change but his omission of the role of the state in it is peculiar given the undeniable power and importance of the state in modern societies. How would decomplexification and decentralization take place without, or against the state? The reader infers that a smaller state is degrowth's aim, but there is no elaboration of what smaller is or how it would come about. Johanishova and Wolf (2012) too ignore in their reasoning the state, focussed as they are on what they call 'economic democracy', that is how cooperatives can proliferate and grow a mode of production that is not capitalistic – an interstitial new economy alongside the capitalist economy. The authors propose limiting the power of corporations by regulating markets, supporting social enterprises, and redistributing income and capital. But such reforms require political enforcement. Who and how will enforce such limits and

<sup>1</sup> An attempt to use Wright's theory of transformation but with a different theoretical purpose than the one presented here is by Petridis (2016) who developed a framework for analyzing the non reformist reforms coming out of the degrowth literature.

<sup>2</sup> Most material on degrowth is published in English and French, both languages that we can read. We could not cover the German or Nordic literatures and we might be missing something there. We did not find something relevant on the question of degrowth and the state in Spanish, Italian or Greek.

redistributions is not answered. Like much of the rest of the degrowth literature, the assumption is that good proposals will be taken up by political actors.

Trainer (2012) can be considered as the principal defender of an interstitial strategy within the degrowth community, his approach explicitly ignoring the state as a locus of change, proposing institutions and arrangements to self-organize simple, alternative modes of production, along the ideals of horizontal economies, and participative social norms. He imagines a degrowth society with subjects that live in a 'simple way' and a decentralized model of governance geared around communities and associations of communitarian assemblies. This vision of horizontal political organization is quite popular among degrowth activists (Demaria et al., 2013). In Trainer's as in others' work, however, there is little thought on how this transformation could take place, other than general allusions to a systemic collapse (without rupture) after which alternative modes of living and organizing that now are marginal will become prevalent. Why and how this would be the outcome of a collapse is not explained.

From a more symbiotic perspective, Ott (2012) proposes small changes on the institutional setting of the liberal state, without putting in question the principles of liberal democracy. Ott has inspired further work on degrowth as a liberal project and on radical transformation via reform (Strunz and Bartkowski, 2018). Ott advocates what he calls a modest scenario of degrowth. For him, the post-war achievements of "decent liberal European democracies" (France and Germany), such as the welfare state and the enlargement of the middle class, should not be taken lightly. He calls for further democratization - a Habermasian deliberative democracy complementing a hard core of the representative political system (parliament, elections, etc.) with the soft communicative power of civil society, and intermediate zones in which non-governmental organizations, policy advisors, academics, concerned scientists, pressure groups and others propose policy ideas. Ott accepts non-violent civil disobedience for "specific non-trivial occasions" in order to keep democratization alive. The better environmental and social record of social democracies, Ott argues, is proof that a deliberative democracy can be sufficient for degrowth. Ott's is a vision of a state configuration - in this case a reformist one - but like other visions it lacks a theory or analysis of the dynamics that can make his vision come true.

Romano favours also a symbiotic approach, but very different to that of Ott. Romano (2012) has criticized the degrowth community for its prevailing preference to a horizontalist regime like that of Trainer (Romano, 2016). Liberal democratic culture is premised on the free realization of the unlimited wants and desires of individuals (D'Alisa, 2019). This liberal ideology materializes in a horizontalist regime and an institutional system, Romano argues, that in principle is not supposed to intervene to steer individual actors and their networks in a specific direction. The role of the state is only to facilitate the creation of arenas, like Ott's civil society institutions, where individuals pursue their own ideas of the good life (Romano, 2016). The state under liberalism is seen as a neutral regime (Mason, 1990) not supposed to promote a particular conception of the good life. Romano (2012) instead envisions a verticalist state that does not purport to be neutral and where public authorities promote and actively stir a collective path in a desired direction (what Rivera (2018) calls a socialist state). Beyond theoretical principles, however, Romano does not clarify how this state configuration would look like, how it might be fostered or how such a state could be re-founded given current configurations.

Boillat et al. (2012) offer an empirical contribution to the symbiotic approach highlighting the importance of the sphere of production without denying the importance of politics. They investigate the response of the Cuban farming system in the Special Period. The authors note a shift from an industrialized system to a small-scale self-managed agro-ecological system. They conclude that socialist systems might be more amenable to the promotion of degrowth principles. They do not explain, however, how the communist state configuration of Cuba

works or how it favoured or hindered the adaptive strategies of Cuban farmers. Deriu (2012) hints to a symbiotic strategy, and looks at how current state configurations put obstacles to changes in a degrowth direction. Deriu explains how nation states have lost power to international power centres such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund. The prerogatives of these international organizations, Deriu argues, are economic. Citing Habermas, he argues that during the era of the modern welfare system, states regulated national economies but nowadays states are embedded in a globalized and financialized market economy that leave them little freedom of control. There is no single state government that can care about, much less take care of, its own citizens, Deriu concludes.

Beyond the Special Issue on degrowth and democracy, there are few other works in English that make connections between degrowth and the question of the state. They all hint to symbiotic approaches: Buhr et al. (2018) looks at how local political institutions can favour degrowth, and proposes semantic strategies to attract municipal politicians. Joutsenvirta (2016) shows how the disruptions effected by grassroots institutional innovations, such as a time bank, can be limited by state legislations that are against such transformations. Kish and Quilley (2017) identify the transformation of the state as one of the complex dilemmas in developing a politics of degrowth, but do not develop a theory of state and its change. Dittmer (2013) defends a symbiotic approach to monetary reform and is critical of the more interstitial proposals for alternative, community currencies, that he finds ineffective and not at a scale that can make difference. Kunze and Becker (2015) instead support community-based energy transitions, while embracing also a symbiotic transformation of the state in ways that can support such interstitial initiatives.

Finally Koch and Fritz (2014) investigate if socio-democratic systems with bolder welfare states perform better environmentally than more liberal regimes. They find that the data does not confirm this hypothesis. The authors sustain that state policies should not prioritise economic growth if social and ecological prosperity is to be reached. Both liberal and socio-democratic regimes have prioritized growth, however. In his keynote speech during the 6th International Degrowth Conference, held in Malmo in August 2018, Koch (2018) suggested that research on degrowth has to look more at materialist theories of state, such as those of Gramsci, Poulantzas and Bourdieu. This is what we aim to do in this article, focussing on one part of Gramsci's work and theory of the state. Where we slightly differ from Koch is that we want to avoid what Bourdieu (2014) criticised as a 'functionalist materialism', that is a focus only on the roles and functions that the state can play in a transition. And we want to avoid the reification of the state with a narrative of a dichotomy between top-down policies of the state and bottom-up social practices of the people. Neo-Gramscian scholars, that we follow here, have criticized this dichotomy preferring to think of the state as a relational social force (Jessop, 2016 - see section 3).

## 2.2. The French degrowth literature on the question of the state

The French degrowth literature has engaged more directly with the question of the state. As an anecdotal piece of evidence, when we were translating our degrowth vocabulary into French, our publishers found it unthinkable that a book on degrowth eluded the question of the state and asked for a new entry. Paul Ariès (2015), who wrote it, argues that advocates of degrowth should understand how the state promotes growth and reflect on alternative institutional ways to "stand up together" (playing with the etymology of the word state, which in Latin means to stand upright). Ariès notes that degrowth scholarship has advanced its criticism of economy and technology but is stagnant in its take on the state. Existing (French) works on the state see it as a repressive apparatus for the conservation of economic hegemony, as the main force that reproduces the ideology of growth, or as an agent focused on productivity and growth. Ariès suggests that the nation state cannot be the institutional framework within which to promote

degrowth. Like others, he advocates re-localization and a confederation of small-scale institutions, a symbiotic approach of a sorts. He hints to a state at a human scale, a quantitative approach of how big or small the state should be, that as we saw with Bonaiuti is prevalent in the degrowth literature.

In the brief editorial to Entropia's issue on degrowth and the state the journal's editor Besson-Girard (2012a) points to a shared understanding among the authors about the 'sacred' legitimacy of the state, with rituals and protocols that bond together its citizens. Where there is disagreement among contributors, the editor claims, is in what to do with the actual state – reform it or overhaul it? The first and second sections of the special issue present symbiotic approaches to state transformation with an emphasis on the shrinking of the state. Indeed, even if they embrace political visions that resonate with an anarchist view none of the contributors imagine getting to such arrangements ignoring the state and acting only in the civil society arena.

Jarrige (2012) claims that state and market are the two sides of the same coin of techno-industrial modernization. He shows how the modern state emerged out of struggles between elites, who want to concentrate power, and a populace, who generally defended self-governing practices destroyed by centralization. Morillon-Brière (2012) presents Bernard Charbonneau's thesis of a totalitarian virus in the modern state. Totalitarianism, the author argues, is not a matter of ideology but an outcome of technological (Gruca, 2012) and economic power. Like most in the degrowth literature, Morillon-Brière advocates political arrangements of modest size - connected communities associated in a federation, supranational authorities assuring the defence of human beings within national borders. The nation state should be the outcome of this federative process, and act only as a moderator of conflicts between constituent communities and regions. This approach echoes a liberal view of the state as a neutral arbiter.

Gruca (2012) points that the state produces the nation and not the other way around. He too advocates a reduction of the state to a human scale. Like Morillon-Brière, Gruca then implicitly supports the idea that not only small is beautiful but that small is also good. The potential for evil is in a large-sized state. However, he also notices a paradox: those who want to downsize the state often invoke environmental disasters such as climate change as the reason. These disasters, however, are big in scale thus the scale of organization to confront them must be big too. Neyrat (2012) maintains that the state protects the population from hostile forces; but its role as a guarantor of protection is also the cause of its authoritarian drift towards the concentration of power and is part of the growth imaginary. He proposes a strategy to debunk such a tendency of the state, a strategy he calls "disarchie", a disarticulation of state configuration thanks to an infiltration of the body of the state with a principle of anarchy. However, Neyrat never details this vision or explains how it is possible to infiltrate the state institutions with anarchic principles.

In the second part of the Entropia issue Cochet (2012), a long-standing politician of the French green party, claims that degrowth will happen because of an incumbent collapse, a collapse that will lead to communities organized at a smaller scale. This poses the question of violence. For Cochet the main function of the state is the containment of violence. In the past violent conflicts were solved within groups for their members (e.g. families, clans, tribes). The modern state guarantees the protection of each individual that is part of the nation. After collapse Cochet predicts a plurality of small states, similar to the German and Italian city-states of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To avoid a return to private violence, all citizens will have to participate in police service, Cochet argues, proposing a model of community policing.

Latouche's contribution (2012) is about power, not the state, and built around Gandhi's project of autonomy (Swaraj). Degrowth, he argues, is anarchist, not because it rejects the principle of power, but because it rejects its use in the name of utopia. The political question for an alternative movement, Latouche argues, is not how to grab the power of the state but how to control those in power and make them

satisfy people's claims. Here Gandhi's strategy of Satyagraha and Swaraj - resistance, passive disobedience and self-organization – is relevant. Latouche has sympathy for direct democracy, but is against a complete rejection of representative democracy. He proposes a small-scale state, arguing, like others, that democracy can be effective and rooted only if applied at a bioregional scale. A minimal arbitrage among sovereign polities with very different statutes should be instituted at a global level. As a consequence, he also evokes a neutralitarian articulation of the emergent sovereign polities.

In a very different contribution, Roland (2012) contrasts the apparatus of the state with a theatre company, the former being a dead model, the latter a living organization. The problem with the state is its sacred origin that suppresses the evolution of organic structures, he argues. The state is a system of prohibitions and coercive controls meant to avoid a return to chaotic disorder. As a sacred secular order, the state cannot accept real autonomy, because autonomy revives the return of chaos. Roland invites the reader to think about the re-configuration of the state as an organic collective with different levels nested into each other, and the consciousness of the '*raison d'être*' of the organization present at every level and in each constituent individual. As an example he uses the theatre piece, actors play right only when they have a clear idea of the dramaturgy of the piece they are part of.

Charbonneau (2012) notes a proliferation of new agencies and organizations inside the state, a corollary of techno-science. With each new technological innovation (e.g. nuclear power), there is a new state organization (e.g. the agency for the nuclear security). The opacity of political structures and the powerlessness of politicians to steer the state increases with expansion. This explains why there is a technocratic drift in governance and how the state becomes an oppressive machine. Charbonneau urges those who want degrowth to contest representative democracy, and stop voting in elections. Charbonneau's analysis maintains a problematic, in our view, idea that political power just dominates and oppresses civil society, as if those that hold the reins of the state are not part of the same social forces as their constituents.

The third part of the Entropia volume hosts those who are sympathetic to anarchism and make a case for abolishing the state, privileging an interstitial metamorphosis of the state, with the focus on building alternatives outside the existing state. Homs (2012) stresses that the contemporary state, unlike the absolutist monarchic state, has as its objective the increase of the value of capital. It is then not possible anymore to preserve the state without preserving capitalism and hence growth. A crisis of growth is a crisis of capital, and the state has become the manager of capitalist disaster. The state has lost its function as the reproducer of society (functions such as justice, school, redistribution and social protection are diminishing), its role reduced to repression. Homs concludes that it is no longer necessary to occupy or reform institutions but instead organize collectively to stop participating in the valorization of capital.

For Luquet and Luquet (2012) the modern state found its legitimacy on the promise to protect people from individual greed and a capricious nature. The state secures the freedoms of those who are members of the nation on the condition that they accept several limitations. In liberal democracy growing the economy is pursued in the name of individual freedom because growth allegedly improves the individual's capacity to meet their own needs; but this growth implies an increase, also, of the administrative apparatus and of the capacity for the state to have its citizens on a leash. Those who want degrowth, Luquet and Luquet argue should advocate terminating the pact with the state, indeed human freedom can only be reached if people find again the capacity to act, and master their circumstances of life. Nation states, they argue like Homs, have capitulated to capital. Those who want degrowth should construct their own economic autonomy at a local level without counting anymore on the state to steer society in the direction they want. Besson-Girard (2012b) underlines the importance of overcoming state sovereignty because the biosphere has nothing to do with national territorial borders. For him, degrowth is not only about a change of a

scale it is about rethinking the way human beings relate among themselves and with the no-human world. It is an ethical and political obligation, both symbolic and material to the organization of life in common.

Rackham (2012), however, argues that this autonomy, unlike what some in the degrowth literature argue, cannot be constructed with small-scale organizations at the margins of the existing state. Small anarchist islands cannot avoid meeting their needs through capitalist markets. They cannot solve also the environmental problems capitalist businesses cause and they cannot avoid the state's imposition of laws, regulations and polices. If these degrowth islands were to start challenging the capitalist system they would be repressed with the use of force. This is why for Rackham, the only possible change is a revolutionary and radical rupture with current society. This requires the abolition globally of societal relations of domination (hierarchies and states) and an end to the wage relation that underlies the exploitation of labour. Rackham is a clear expression of the rupturist strategy of revolutionary attack to the state, in Wright's terms.

### 2.3. Strategies of state transformation in the degrowth literature

The degrowth literature on the state is normative. It sees the state as a thing, or a structure, that society should reform (symbiotic metamorphosis) or ignore (interstitial metamorphosis) and only occasionally revolt against (rupture, as in the case of Rackham). The problem of the state is seen as one of size or scale - a good state is a small state with flows manageable directly by its constituents within bioregions. The current state is too big, tied to the techno-economic system and capitalist interests, and therefore to the pursuit of growth. The state, most contributors argue in the Anglo and Francophone literatures, provided for a while vital welfare functions, but now its role has been reduced to protecting capitalist interests. Most degrowth writers envisage instead a political organization based on small, inter-connected communities (the interstitial trajectory) or state (the symbiotic trajectory) federated at regional, national and international scales.

The vagueness in what the confederation of communities or small states would look like, arguably a problem, is the least of our concerns with this account of the state. We are concerned instead that first, this literature maintains prevalently an understanding of the state as a system out there separate from society - one that acts upon society, or one that reversely, society intervenes upon and changes it as if it were a machine independent of society. This underplays how the state embodies and accommodates the relations and beliefs of its constituents, and vice versa, how subjects are produced by the state.

Second, the quantitative focus (the size) misses a qualitative dimension of the state - what functions should a state, independent of its size have to play, and how would it fulfil them in say the confederative configurations advocated? Anarchist/interstitial accounts underestimate the question of enforcement - living within limits, respecting democracy and freedoms, stopping expansion, etc, won't happen on their own, they all require organization and force. Who would apply this force, and how? Interstitial strategy approaches omit this question because they tend to see all repression as bad. But climate change for instance is a global problem that demands restrictions. How would global (confederate or not) state institutions enforce limits, and if they need repress individual or groups that may not want to limit their emissions?

Third, the theory of the state involved is static. It diagnoses entanglements and imagines a different future. There is little thought though on how a specific trajectory could take place because there is no underlying theory of how the state works or changes. Why and how would a state decentralize, reduce its scale or change its functions? Given the lack of theory, interstitial strategists envision a trajectory towards confederated communities following naturally after a systemic collapse. In an anarchist spirit, the desired new emerges once the old is 'burned down'. Why and how this would be the outcome o and not say a

regress to tribalism or Medieval monarchies or autocracies is not explained - just wished for.

On the other side, the supporters of the symbiotic strategy do not explain how a compromise with the dominant forces can change the trajectory in the direction of degrowth, and underestimate how interstitial practices are necessary for creating and strengthening the new values upon which a symbiotic strategy could build upon. The dichotomy here between transformation outside, and without, the state (the interstitial metamorphosis) through nowtopias, eco-communities, etc; and the more reformist approach that addresses policies to the existing state (the symbiotic approach) starts becoming unproductive. Cosme et al. (2017) were the first to suggest in this journal that degrowth scholarship faces this paradox: how to make compatible its claims for the blooming of bottom-up, grassroots initiatives with its calls for top-down governmental action. In this spirit, we present below a theory of the state that overcomes unproductive dichotomies between social action (the horizontal action of the grassroots initiatives) and political action (the enforced institutional policies that stir the direction of a society). We propose an analytical tool that has been already applied to empirical studies (e.g. D'Alisa and Kallis, 2016). It is not a utopian vision of a would-be state configuration. It is a theory that can help to analyse what the state is, how it changes, and in relation, how it may change in a desired direction.

### 3. Gramsci's theory of the integral state

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was an Italian intellectual and communist politician, who died imprisoned by the Mussolini regime. Although a communist, Gramsci parted from the Marxist-Leninist tradition in the question of the state. According to certain readings of Marx the modern capitalist form of the state serves the dominant class by guaranteeing its property and interests, controlling and repressing subaltern groups (Losurdo, 1997). Historical events such as World War One shaped a deterministic position towards the State in Marxist-Leninist thought - communism, once established, was supposed to replace a state that would no longer be necessary. Under communism, the state's repressive apparatus would disappear, and only its administrative functions would endure. This theory of the eventual abolition of the state never convinced Gramsci, who instead developed a different possibility on Marx's theory, that of an understanding of the state as a terrain and social relation. This is why, some argue, Gramsci's thought and its revolutionary approach is apt for explaining, against prevalent interpretations of Marx, the perpetuation of the capitalist state as well as possibilities for a post-capitalist state (Losurdo, 1997).

A Gramscian approach to the state is growing in political theory, critical geography, international studies, and political ecology with several empirical studies (Ekers et al., 2009; Brand et al., 2008; Painter, 2006; Jessop, 2016; Andreucci, 2017). 'Neo'-Gramscian scholars debunk the reification of the state. Using a "strategic relational approach" (Jessop, 2016), they argue that the state is not a thing, a definable and monolithic actor that acts upon and against the people it rules. The state, they argue, is not a rational and independent subject with an indisputable purpose; rather, it expresses heterogeneous social forces and organizations that operate, more often than not, against each other, result of conflicting relations and ideological struggles (Brand et al., 2008). As relational entity it can move along different trajectories of change (Wright, 2009).

In the 'Prison Notebooks' (Gramsci, 2007)<sup>3</sup> Gramsci developed his theory of the integral state. The state for Gramsci is composed of civil society and political society and is the domain of coercion and consent. Political society includes state institutions such as the army, the police, the judiciary system, the bureaucracy, the national education and

<sup>3</sup> Gramsci wrote the Prison Notebooks during his imprisonment between 1929 and 1935. In this chapter we refer to the 2007 Italian edition.

public health systems, while civil society includes institutions such as private school, the Church, voluntary associations, NGOs, trade unions and families. The integral state is not to be confused with the common use of the term state, which includes only governmental institutions – in Gramsci's terms 'the political society'. Civil society and political society are not separate – they are organically interpenetrated and mutually reinforcing; in Wright's terms that we have been using it means that interstitial grassroots changes when endowed of a certain strength and effectiveness can corroborate institutional symbiotic changes of the state. Vice versa, symbiotic institutionalization can promote a faster spread of self-organized popular initiatives, or with the conceptual terms we have been using here, symbiotic reforms can open up interstitial spaces.

Different groups struggle to fulfil their divergent political visions in the domains of civil and political society (Thomas, 2009) and this is the source of change. Gramsci distinguished civil and political society methodologically to study their prevalent but not exclusive logics and their specific configurations and evolutions. In this sense, political society is principally the locus of enforcement and legitimate use of coercive power, and civil society the arena where different groups struggle ideologically for consent. Coercion, however, is exercised in civil society and consent is gained in the political arena too. Even if we were to abolish political institutions, as some anarchists want, domination and oppression would still operate in civil society, which is permeated by power relations and coercion too (Losurdo, 1997; Brand et al., 2008). This helps to go beyond the misplaced idea, influential also in degrowth scholarship, according to which the state is always the locus of violence, subjugation and abuse of power, while (civil) society is the domain of horizontalism, harmony and freedom (Losurdo, 1997). In our own empirical study of how authorities responded after a natural disaster in the south of Italy, we found an entanglement of rulers and ruled, the former prioritizing economic growth, but also responding to the demands of the latter, so that the final set of policies (lamentably one that increased vulnerability to future risks) gained the consent of people, resonating as it did with many of their claims (D'Alisa and Kallis, 2016). Likewise, if we want to understand for example why carbon taxes have become a non-starter for governments, we have to look into the interplay of civil and political society, and not only the capturing of institutions by fossil fuel industry interests.

No ruling class survives merely by exercising force; it has to establish a 'hegemony', a prevalent discourse that makes sense for many actors in society because it responds to their interpretation of the issues at stake and their responses to them. Hegemony is manifested as institutions, procedures and practices, which respond effectively to commonsensical demands and claims of people. The concept of common sense is critical for Gramsci. Common sense refers to the "uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become 'common' in any given epoch" (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971, p. 322). Gramsci uses common senses in plural (not used in English) to emphasise that in any given time and society common people hold different, taken-for-granted ideas. A hegemonic discourse articulates and prioritises some common senses to the detriment of others. Ruling elites protect their interests reordering common senses via consent and only if needed they use coercion. Counter-hegemonic groups to reinterpret, reorder and change social reality can mobilize dormant common senses. Reordering, however is not merely a matter of discourse. Common senses are articulated, embodied and performed every day in practice (Garcia-Lopez et al., 2017). This emphasis on common senses should not induce the reader to think that Gramsci was an idealist, indeed the production of consent via the articulation of common senses affects the everyday materiality of people's lives (Brand, 2018).

Social change then is an amalgam of change in everyday practices, ideas (interstitial strategies) and eventually institutions of coercion and enforcement (symbiotic strategies). The integral state theory highlights the interactions and mutual reinforcement that exist between common

senses and embodied values produced in the economic and social sphere and those reproduced through the production of laws and ordered and executed by the juridical and police forces. Those that pay too much emphasis on the coercive power of the state (or the capturing of the state via ruptural strategies) underestimate the power of integral states to generalize, normalize and universalize needs and desires. Only the effective combination of interstitial and symbiotic strategies can legitimize in specific moments and contexts a sharp rupture with powerful interests.

In Gramsci's system, we should point out, there is no outside to the state, and it is not possible to abolish or go beyond the state. We are always within the integral state. If we are to create a society that does not depend on growth, we should start building a counter-hegemony within the integral state by changes in the realms of both civil and political society (that is with an effective and mingled combination of interstitial and symbiotic strategy).

Gramsci gives us a language to examine how the ideology and practice of growth is reproduced. Growth is both a matter of prevalent institutions at the realm of political society imbued with the logic of growth (the Finance Ministries, the GDP leagues, the growth goals and clauses, etc) and the everyday performance of identities and the accumulation of experiences that make the pursuit of growth common sense (for example our experiences of personal hardships when the economy is in recession, working for a firm that has growth targets, our use of a growth vocabulary to talk about personal development and change, etc).

Gramsci's lexicon is also a vocabulary for thinking how a transition could evolve, overcoming a division between grassroots and policy, or bottom-up and top-down action. The grassroots is not an alternative to the state – civil society is the one half of the integral state transformation. What grassroots practices often do is construct a counter-hegemony that reorders common-senses – the fate of this counter-hegemony depends on its ability to occupy the political sphere and use the collective force of the state to spread the new common senses in different sphere of the society, transforming the current institutions and (re)producing new ones. For example, alternative economies, say food cooperatives or community currencies, are new civil society institutions that nurture new common senses. As they expand, they undo the common sense of growth and make degrowth ideas potentially hegemonic, creating conditions for a social and political force to change political institutions in the same direction.

Grassroots actions alone are insufficient from a Gramscian perspective. Greater forces or institutions often limit them. For example, alternative food networks are limited by access to land or high land prices, by legislative rules that prioritize corporate agriculture, by price dumping in 'liberalized' food markets, or by the rising costs of public health or education that make it hard for small scale farmers to secure their living. Young, back-to-the-land farmers who want to produce and distribute food differently, end up exploiting themselves, overworking in order to sell at a fair and affordable price. Likewise, co-housing or cooperative housing initiatives are swamped by private capital and gentrification in liberalized housing markets without rent controls. Enter the policies advocated by degrowth economists. These are a means of opening space and releasing resources in support of the new practices, values and common senses alternative economies convey, such as food sovereignty and co-housing. A reduction of working hours and a basic income make it more possible for people to devote time to alternative food networks and gain collective sovereignty on their nutrition. Policies for rent control, price controls or subsidies for alternative housing projects directly benefit new economy initiatives and foster new norms of co-housing and co-habitation.

The demand though for such political/institutional changes would not come without a critical mass of people involved in – and making a living from – alternative grassroots economies. Alternative food networks, open software communities or solidarity practices, such as popular health clinics change the common sense of participants and

allow them to imagine different knowledge, health, care or education systems. Participants, and those who experience these projects become then a potential base for articulating social demands for changing political institutions (e.g. intellectual copyright, or welfare provision) to support their projects.

Organizing for change in civil society and political organizing for occupying the sphere of political society are the two sides of the same coin. To reverse the process that consolidates the values and beliefs of the growth society, those who want change cannot simply take power, say through elections and then implement the policies they want. Imagine for the sake of illustration a wild scenario that a revolution or an election puts Herman Daly as the leader of the U.S., or Kate Raworth of the U.K. Even in that extreme case, little would change, unless there was a common sense cultivated in society that steady state or post-growth is the way to go. Without such a culture, even the most enlightened leaders would find quickly their policies undermined by uncooperative administrations and resistant populations. Of course to end up with such leaders, the society itself must have changed. Transformation then involves a coevolutionary change between civil and political society. A degrowth transformation requires first social relationships and activities that provide viable livelihoods and produce in the ground, and not in the abstract, common senses that prioritize 'degrowth-oriented' values and objectives. In parallel, those who believe and live by these values have to organize politically for the implementation of policies that reflect these common senses.

For Gramsci then cultural change is fundamental. He rejects the idea that those who want change can somehow take control of political society and force their decisions on others. This does not mean that his model allows only for slow, long-term change of beliefs. A social and political rupture is possible and can force many people to change dramatically their everyday lives in a new direction. Change can take place fast, from one day to the other (say as a result of a crisis or a revolution) but the main point here is that people will accept it only if they find it resonating with their everyday needs and prevalent beliefs – otherwise, they will attempt to re-establish the prior condition.

#### 4. Grounding social change: maximum income

Consider the illustrative case of a maximum income (Alexander, 2015; Pizzigati, 2018). From a degrowth or steady state economics perspective, a maximum income makes sense. As Herman Daly puts it 'if you have a limited total, and you also have a minimum income, then that implies a maximum somewhere. The question then becomes: should that maximum be such that a lot of people can receive it, or just a few? So it's a question of distribution.' (Daly and Kunkel, 2018).

The proposal for a maximum income has been around for decades, but taxation of high salaries has decreased not increased. Policy change is not only a matter of sound ideas, but also working out the conditions under which these ideas can be implemented. The implementation of a maximum income is normally the prerogative of a national parliament or equivalent. Political society however is not independent of civil society. It is not just that vested interests stop progressive taxation politically. Within civil society there would probably be great opposition were the ruling party in a parliament to vote for a maximum income, say through a very high tax on high incomes. Civil society is permeated with sentiments that oppose taxation. The commonsensical refrain "why should I give money that I worked hard to make to the state" emerges when a discussion about taxation starts. Even those who would benefit from progressive tax rises often oppose them with a view that this is unjust and that the state is robbing those who produce value. From a Gramscian perspective, our attention should then shift to creating new common senses within civil society.

We do not mean here just a media or publicity campaign. We mean a new, rooted common sense about the reasonableness of a cap on income (and on wealth). Common senses are rooted in practices and experiences. The alternative economy with its values of solidarity,

dignity and cooperation is a natural incubator for new common senses around the notion of enough is enough (Dietz and O'Neill, 2012). For example, most ethical firms or cooperatives have an internal limit in the salary difference between highest and lowest paid worker (an interstitial strategy). In the cooperative bank "Banca Etica" in Italy, for example, in 2010 that one of us was a member, the salary earned by the CEO of the bank could not be more than 6.5 times the salary of the lowest paid worker. The idea was that such a ratio is necessary to secure dignity in each and every job. If you work or interact with a social business, say as a member or client of an ethical bank or a consumer cooperative, the idea of a salary limit seems natural (like many parts of the growth economy are reproduced by those who want degrowth, precisely because they are taken for granted elements of their everyday life and work). The challenge is then to spread the solidarity economy and its common sense of 'enough is enough' or to have its ideas flow to other sectors.

Ecological economists who are disappointed that their proposals speak to the void, could organize first in their own home turf and try to pass their logic to the (public) university where they work and spend most of their lives. Why not start a campaign to set a maximum salary for the University Rector in relation to the salary, let's say, of the university janitors? (Or if such a cap already implicitly exists, as it does in the public sector in some countries, then visibilize it and show the absurdity that it doesn't exist in the private sector). Once the logic of reciprocity and limit is established in public agencies (schools, hospitals, transport, tax authorities) social support for a law that establishes a maximum is more plausible (an effective symbiotic strategy that can create the condition of a ruptural event with the current state of affairs).

To recap: a Gramscian model of the state shows that a transition requires a cultural change of common senses through the creation of new alternative spaces and institutions *and* the generalization of these changes through intervention at the level of political institutions. The two go together. The issue, then, is not, as many in the degrowth literature want it, of going beyond the state or imagining a new configuration, a confederation of communities or else. The issue is how to start the difficult everyday work of transforming the state and laying its foundation anew building first on practices from below and then establishing new institutions. The question is how the self-governing organizations and norms prefigured by those who write about and practice degrowth would permeate the state structure and reshape state logics.

#### 5. Conclusions

This paper pointed to a gap in the degrowth literature: its theorization of the state. Those who make degrowth policy proposals address them in a void, without an underlying theory of how, or under what conditions, revolutionary reforms such as those that they imply could ever be realised. Those who favour alternative, grassroots economic practices or an abolition of the state by a confederation of self-governed and ecologically sufficient communities lack a clear theory of transformation other than through a collapse after which, for some unexplained reason, political organization will evolve towards their desired configuration.

A Gramscian theory of the integral state is one possible avenue for thinking about social transformation and the state. The state is not politicians, bureaucrats and the administrative apparatus, but an integral, dialectical process between civil and political society with a constant interplay of the battle for ideas with the battle for institutions of enforcement. The state changes as new ideas and common senses emerge and get reordered in civil society, and as social groups struggle for new institutions that embody, facilitate and enforce the new common senses. A transition beyond growth would require an end to the ideological and institutional hegemony of growth – this means an abolition of growth institutions and a demise of taken-for-granted growth values.

In line with Wright's models of transformation, the ruptural vision of degrowth should count on a Gramscian theory of state for envisioning an effective transformative trajectory of change. A Gramscian theory allows to articulate coherently symbiotic and interstitial strategies, and how actions within and outside government institutions, both at the political and the socio-cultural level, need one another and can only evolve together.

In terms of research, it is important to understand how the idea of growth reproduces its hegemony and adapts to crises and challenges. We need more studies like that of Schmelzer (2015) for the OECD investigating with concrete case studies how the idea of growth became hegemonic. This could extend beyond state or inter-state institutions and look at the interplay with the building of hegemony within civil society and its institutions in different geographical contexts. Empirical research can shed light on the institutions that maintain logics of expansion and growth at the domain of political society, as well as the everyday practices and performances that permeate society with the language and rationality of growth. This may include studies of political institutions (e.g. Ministries of Finance, the EU stability pact, etc) as well as civil society institutions (the university, the hospital, competitive sports) looking at the mechanisms and taken for granted practices that perpetuate a growth imperative both through consent and coercion. In a context of transformation, it is important to understand better how and why common-senses change over time (sometimes fast, sometimes slow), how hegemonies get toppled and counter-hegemonic projects prevail and in relation what is the role of performance and prefiguration in these changes or how crisis unsettles taken for granted ideas and institutions.

At the level of political strategy, a Gramscian perspective prioritises as a first step doing the difficult groundwork necessary at the realm of civil society. Ecological economists have paid little attention to politics and strategy, and have considered job done in coming up with a policy proposal that makes sense. Gramsci's theory shows that change passes through a reordering of common senses at the level of civil society – and this involves rooted practices that demonstrably work, and within which new, post or degrowth ideas and values start making sense. From this perspective, degrowth's emphasis on connecting activism with science is important. It is not enough for us as scholars to come up with good ideas. If we want to see change, we need to act as action researchers to see these changes happen. And there is no better place to start than our own home or workplace.

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