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## Degrowth and the Global South? How institutionalism can complement a timely discourse on ecologically sustainable development in an unequal world

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# **Degrowth and the Global South?**

## **How institutionalism can complement a timely discourse on ecologically sustainable development in an unequal world**

**Claudius Gräbner-Radkowitzsch and Birte Strunk**

# Degrowth and the Global South?

How institutionalism can complement a timely discourse on ecologically sustainable development in an unequal world\*

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## Abstract

The goal of this paper is twofold: first, it assesses the current state of collaboration between institutionalist economics and the academic degrowth discourse on the topic of global inequalities. Since a systematic literature review of the current degrowth discourse shows that the level of such collaboration is limited, the second goal of the paper is to outline avenues through which institutionalist scholars could contribute to the current academic degrowth discourse. These include the provision of theories of institutional change, a methodological reflection of selected formal models, and substantive insights on the co-evolution of institutions and technological change.

**Keywords:** degrowth, institutions, development, core-periphery relations, structuralism, dependency, planetary boundaries

**JEL Classification Codes:** B52, O44, Q01, Q57

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## Introduction

Economic growth has long been treated as the core policy strategy to increase living standards without, supposedly, having to face distributional struggles and ecological boundaries, despite ongoing critique from various academic fields, including institutionalist scholars (e.g., already Myrdal 1974). More recently, a related and interdisciplinary discourse on ‘degrowth’ has established itself as an academic and activist movement, which similarly criticizes the appropriateness of economic growth as a core policy goal (see, e.g., Schmelzer et al. 2022).

The present paper begins by studying the extent of academic exchange between institutionalist economics on the one hand, and the academic degrowth discourse specifically related to the matter of global inequalities, and especially the role of the Global South, on the other hand.<sup>1</sup> Given their similar value base, as well as obvious topical and methodological affinities, one might expect this exchange to be intense. Our systematic literature review, however, reveals that the actual academic exchange on this topic remains scarce, despite earlier calls for closer collaboration (e.g., van den Bergh & Kallis 2012).

This first finding motivates the second main goal pursued by the present paper: we are convinced that this lack of exchange and collaboration is unsatisfactory and is worth being addressed explicitly. In fact, there are many substantive, methodological, and meta-theoretical affinities between institutionalism and the degrowth literature that would justify a closer integration than the one that has taken place in the past 15 years, i.e. since the emergence of degrowth as an academic discourse. To substantiate this claim, we proceed as follows: first, we summarize the findings of our systematic literature review. Second, we explicate ‘How institutionalism can contribute to the academic degrowth discourse’, at least in our own reading.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, we summarize our argument and sketch avenues for future research endeavors.

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<sup>1</sup> It is mainly for methodological reasons that we focus on the *academic* degrowth discourse. Thus, our findings below do not necessarily apply to the degrowth movement as a whole, which includes many actors expressing their ideas beyond the classical academic avenues.

<sup>2</sup> This reading, as well as the overall research design might well be influenced by our own societal and academic positions: two white, European scholars, who received their academic teaching mainly from Western institutions and who live in the Global North.

## Systematic literature review

To evaluate the current level of academic exchange between institutionalist economics and the academic degrowth discourse related to global inequalities, we conducted a systematic literature search on the Web of Science.<sup>3</sup> As a first step, we constructed a data set that represents what we could call the current academic degrowth discourse related to questions on the Global South. We believe that this subset – which is not necessarily representative for the degrowth movement as a whole, since it only considers academic publications in (mainly English-speaking) peer-reviewed academic journals – can be adequately captured by the data from the Web of Science. The formal search criteria we used are summarized in Table 1 and led to a base sample of 218 papers.

*Table 1: The search strings used in the initial literature search on Web of Science. Table taken from Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk (2022).*

Set	Search string	Results	Rationale
#1	Degrowth OR de-growth OR post-growth OR décroissance	4,376	The overall reference to degrowth
#2	“Global North” OR “Global South”	7,097	Direct topical reference
#3	decolonial OR “unequal exchange” OR extractivism	2,365	Indirect topical reference
#4	“dependency theor*” OR “structuralis*” OR “post development*” OR “post-development*”	5,315	Reference to related fields of research
#5	global OR international	2,117,033	Direct reference to relevant adjectives
#6	#1 AND [#2 OR #3 OR #4 OR #5]	241	Merge criteria 1-5
#7	#6 AND English (Languages)	238	Language consistency
#8	#7 AND [Article types: Articles OR Review Article OR Early Access (Document types)]	218	Only consider actual research articles

*Note: The keywords for sets 1-5 were searched for in the article title, abstract, author keywords, and the field KeyWords Plus®, which is the product of a special algorithm from Clarivate Analytics that identifies words and phrases that occur frequently in the cited references of a paper.*

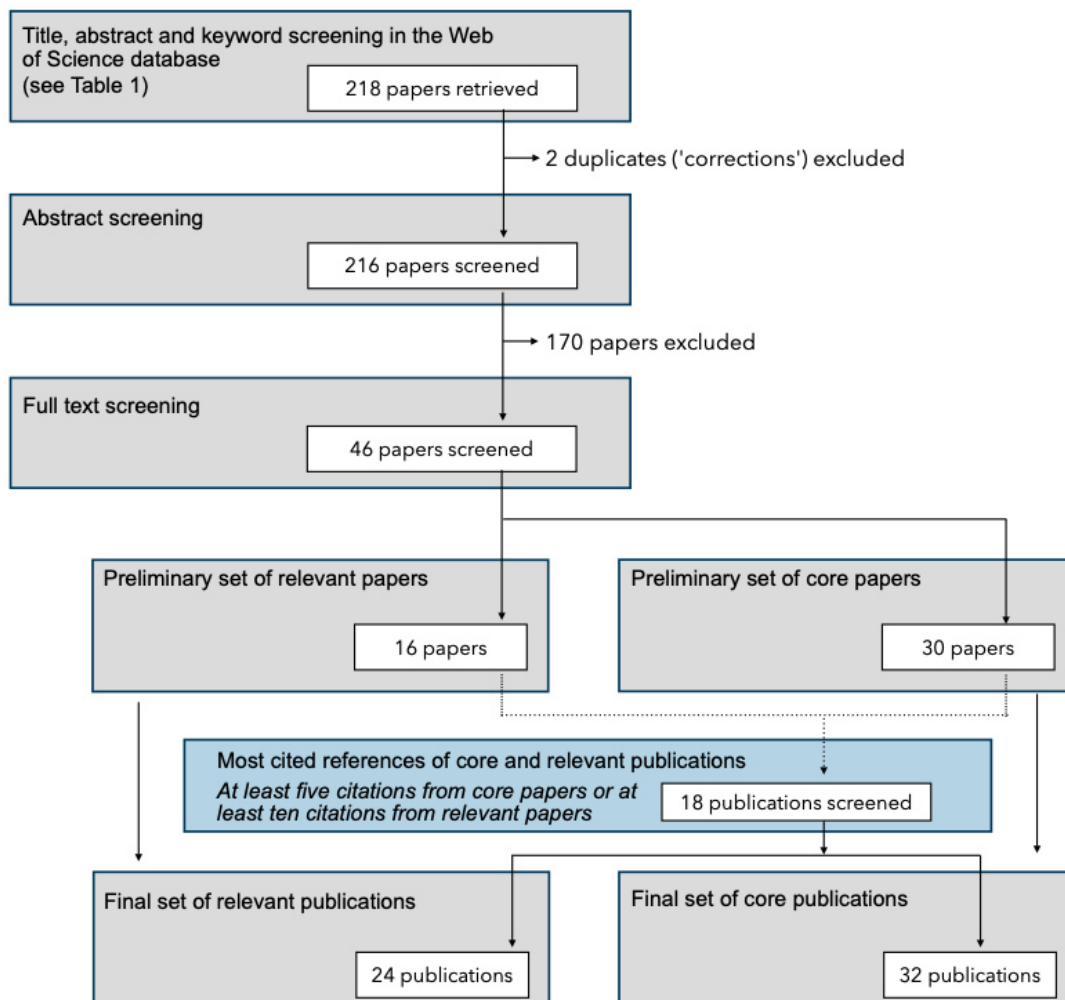
In constructing the final data set we follow the same strategy as in Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk (2022) and, therefore, come up with the same sample: a set of 56 publications we consider to be relevant, 32 of which we consider to be core publications, i.e. publications that had the role of the Global South as their main topic. The remaining papers are considered relevant, but not core, since

<sup>3</sup> This section builds upon and extends our analysis in Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk (2022), where we also provide more detailed information about the review methodology.

they contribute to an analysis of the Global South and its role in the context of degrowth, but do not focus on this as their main topic. A summary of the overall search strategy is given by Figure 1, for more details the readers may refer to Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk (2022).

Figure 1: The PRISMA graph representing the construction of the final literature sample. This visualization as well as the overall research methodology was designed by following the guidelines by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Havránek et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021).

### Screening process



To get an idea about the intensity of the academic exchange between the academic degrowth discourse and institutionalist economics, we then analyzed the cited references of the papers in our sample of relevant and core publications and counted the references to ‘typical’ institutionalist

outlets.<sup>4</sup> The results are summarized in Tables 2a and 2b, which contain the 10 most cited outlets as well as those outlets that one might count as ‘institutionalist journals’. We find that the only outlets to which the discourse refers are the “American Journal of Economics and Sociology” and the “Journal of Economic Issues”, with the overall number of citations being very low. Moreover, most of the citations to the JEI – four of the five in the relevant sample, and one of the two in the core sample – are due to van den Bergh & Kallis (2012), a paper in which two well-known post-growth scholars “aim to provide institutional economists with an update of these debates [about growth] by presenting, assessing, and comparing pro-growth, a-growth, and de-growth proposals” and to suggest “ways in which institutional economists can contribute to this ongoing discourse” (p. 910). Thus, even if our approach to quantify the degree of academic exchange is by no means perfect or even fully adequate, the results suggest that the consideration of institutionalist scholarship by the academic degrowth discourse is currently very modest.

We argue that going forward a stronger interaction will be highly beneficial to the degrowth community, since the current degrowth discourse has some blank spots to which institutionalism could provide compatible and helpful insights, especially with regard to matters of global structural dependencies.<sup>5</sup> To be precise, Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk (2022) identified a number of blank spots of the current academic degrowth discourse related to global dependencies and in our view there are two issues that stand out in terms of the contributions that institutionalist scholars might be able to make. These refer, firstly, to a substantive and, secondly, to a methodological dimension.

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<sup>4</sup> We looked through the list of all the cited sources in our sample and relied on our own assessment as well as the assessment of experts from the field of institutional economics to judge whether a journal should be considered ‘institutionalist’. Journals we would consider falling into this category (but which were not necessarily referred to by the publications in our sample) include the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, the *Evolutionary and Institutional Economics Review*, the *Forum of Social Economics*, the *Journal of Economic Issues*, the *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*, the *Journal of Institutional Economics*, or the *Review of Socio-Economics*.

<sup>5</sup> A question of similar relevance refers to the extent that institutionalism can benefit from such closer academic collaboration. While we are convinced that this would be the case, the present paper will focus on the other direction, leaving the task to clarify the potentials for institutionalists to further research endeavors.

*Table 2: Mostly cited source outlets for all citations from the sample of relevant and core publications.*

<b>Table 2a: Mostly cited sources of relevant publications.</b>		<b>Table 2b: Mostly cited sources of core publications.</b>	
<i>Journal</i>	<i>Citations</i>	<i>Journal</i>	<i>Citations</i>
Ecological Economics	204	Ecological Economics	115
Journal of Cleaner Production	108	Sustainability Science	40
Sustainability Science	55	Journal of Cleaner Production	37
Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era	43	Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era	26
Science	39	Journal of Political Ecology	24
Futures	34	Third World Quarterly	24
Journal of Political Ecology	32	Environmental Values	19
Global Environmental Change	30	Capitalism Nature Socialism	18
Third World Quarterly	30	Geoforum	18
Environmental Values	28	The Journal of Peasant Studies	17
Journal of Economic Issues	5	Journal of Economic Issues	2
American Journal of Economics and Sociology	4	American Journal of Economics and Sociology	1

First, existing contributions in the degrowth discourse on the Global South often focus on synergies between Northern degrowth and Southern post-development approaches. This initial focus on synergies and commonalities, however, led to a de-emphasizing of potential challenges (voiced both in the North and the South) that might arise from degrowth in the Global North for the Global South. Among those challenges regularly mentioned but not yet analyzed in-depth is particularly the problem of structural interdependencies among Northern and Southern countries which may account for potentially adverse short-term effects for individuals in the South if the North were to implement degrowth policies (e.g., Chiengkul 2018, Dengler & Seebacher 2019). While this topic has started to receive increased attention within the degrowth discourse in the past years (e.g., Althouse et al. 2020), we would like to argue that, going forward, degrowth might turn to institutionalist contributions to scrutinize challenges of global interdependencies and their



repercussions for the degrowth project more closely.<sup>6</sup> We outline potential strategies to do so in the next section.

Second, in the methodological dimension, the current degrowth discourse has – for historical and substantive reasons, see Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk (2022) – a strong focus on qualitative and case study methodology. This resembles several branches of institutionalism. The latter, however, managed to diversify its methodological toolkit, e.g. into the direction of system dynamics (e.g., Langarudi & Radzicki 2018), the social fabric matrix (e.g. Hayden 2006a), and agent-based models (e.g., Rengs & Scholz-Wäckerle 2018), without giving up its reflected relationship to formal models in general (for an overview of formal models frequently used in institutionalist research see, e.g., Gräbner 2018). We argue that a similar development would be beneficial for the degrowth discourse as well: thus, when the next section focuses on how institutionalist scholars can contribute to the substantive challenges of the degrowth discourse just mentioned, methods such as system dynamics and agent-based modeling lend themselves as methodological vehicle for analytically studying these challenges. But as it is the case with any (especially quantitative) approach, the theoretical embedding of these tools is essential. In this context, the degrowth discourse could benefit from the methodological debates that institutionalists have had on these methods.<sup>7</sup>

## **How institutionalism can help addressing some substantive challenges of the academic degrowth discourse**

Van den Bergh & Kallis (2012) formulated a call for closer collaboration between institutionalist and degrowth scholars in which they saw the biggest potential for institutionalist research in the (pluralist) investigation of “how GDP growth is exactly perceived in different schools of macroeconomics” (p. 917) and how alternative spaces which already implement degrowth

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<sup>6</sup> Other challenges include, e.g., the potential problems of neo-colonial agenda-setting and an inappropriate framing and topical focus; there are, however, already promising attempts to address these issues (e.g., Dengler & Seebacher 2019), which is why we see the particular merit of triangulation in the area of structural dependencies.

<sup>7</sup> With regard to system dynamics see, e.g., Hayden (2006b) and Radzicki & Tauheed (2009); on agent-based modeling, e.g., Gräbner (2016); on dynamical systems modeling, e.g., Heinrich (2017); and on game theory and formal models more generally, e.g., Elsner (2012).

practices – “Nowtopias”, as the authors call it – are institutionalized (p. 917). The literature survey above indicates that their call remains valid today, but holds for the opposite direction as well: degrowth scholars could also benefit from taking institutionalist work into closer account. In any case, the proposed triangulation of degrowth and institutional scholarship has not yet materialized to the degree possible, even though there have been some contributions highlighting the potential of institutionalist contributions since then (e.g., Likavčan & Scholz-Wäckerle 2018 on technology appropriation in a de-growing society, or Wäckerle et al. 2014 on institutional life cycles). Thus, fostering collaborations between institutionalist and degrowth scholars on the general level remains desirable today as it was in 2012.

Van den Bergh & Kallis (2012) took a more general view on degrowth and institutionalism than the present paper, which focuses on questions of global inequality and dependency. Nonetheless, one of their arguments also strongly applies to the matter of global dependencies: they point out how institutionalism can help degrowth analysis particularly with respect to theorizing on *transitions*, since institutions are of core importance when analyzing any type of socio-ecological transformation. As the academic degrowth discourse moves from being first and foremost a *critique* – the very term ‘degrowth’ has originally been coined to politicize and criticize an unsustainable mode of operating our economies – toward positioning itself as part of a *solution*, they are in ever-greater need of expertise on transition dynamics in real-world settings. In fact, while there are ongoing calls by degrowth advocates to change current institutions and re-design the global economic system, it is our perception that these calls could become more substantive if more consistently backed by institutional theories of how institutions emerge and change over time.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, we argue that the many institutionalist accounts on the co-evolution of institutions and technology are of particular interest. This is especially the case since in much of the current degrowth discourse, technological innovations are often contrasted with social innovations, meaning behavioral or cultural changes that can lead to a reduction of material throughput, usually

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<sup>8</sup> One could hope for a nuanced analysis of growth-dependent and degrowth-permissive institutions in a similar ways as Elsner (2012) studies the transition from defective to cooperative institutions, or how Cordes et al. (2022) study the emergence and breakdown of cooperation more generally.

not by making the processing of materials more efficient, but rather by scaling down consumption of production activities. While such innovations are most likely very important to achieve a transformation towards ecologically and socially sustainable societies, and to reduce existing exploitation relationships on a global scale, the distinction might also shift one's attention too far away from to *co-evolution* of institutions and technology, as it is usually at the heart of the Ayres-style institutionalism, and as it must be considered if not only normatively appealing, but also practically feasible policy programs are to be delineated. Promising vantage points on this subject are manifold, e.g. the study of Greenwood and Holt (2016), who investigate through which institutional changes affluent societies can become less growth-dependent and more sustainable.

Aside from many general contributions on the topic of institutional change, several institutionalist studies already applied theories of institutional change into a broader analysis of global inequality and dependency. For example, Matutinovic (2020) complements classical institutionalist theory of economic divergence due to circular cumulative causation with the concept of autocatalysis from ecology. He then discusses a model of coupled North-South autocatalytic loops in terms of their economic, material, and financial implications, which can serve as an illustration of how meticulous (qualitative) assessment of institutions could be translated into a model of a medium level of formality to illuminate some of the crucial causal mechanisms at work. Such a procedure could be usefully applied to many of the more qualitative contributions from the degrowth discourse, which, after being complemented by institutional theories of institutional change, could be, if necessary, further translated into more elaborated system dynamics or agent-based models to come up with even clearer scenarios to work with.

One example of a more highly formalized model is Gerdes et al. (2022), who developed an agent-based model in which they investigate how global exploitation relationships could be mitigated by alternative world market institutions. While ending such relationships is a recurrent call by degrowth scholars (e.g., Hickel 2020, 2021), the present-day degrowth discourse still focuses more on the critique itself rather than on detailed analyses of institutional changes that are necessary to end global exploitation. One of the crucial findings of the model of Gerdes et al. (2022), for instance, is that sanctioning extractivist activities alone is not an effective strategy to end the exploitation of the Global South, but that such sanctions would need to be complemented by

subsidies for innovation activities directed to improved labor protection and pollution reduction, as well as the reduction of emission in the capital good sector in the Global South. It is this kind of advanced scenario analysis within an institutionalist framework that could serve very well to fill the blank spots of the current degrowth discourse.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this paper has been twofold: the first goal was the assessment of the current state of collaboration between institutionalist economics and degrowth on the topic of global inequalities. Since a systematic literature review of the current degrowth discourse has shown that the level of academic exchange remains low, the second goal of the paper was to sketch some avenues through which institutionalist scholars could help to address certain blank spots in the current degrowth discourse.

The main avenues through which institutionalist scholars could contribute were found to be the following: first, while degrowth scholars regularly call for institutional changes, and criticize existing institutions for failing to meet several crucial demands related to sustainability and justice, they could benefit from the actual theories on institutional change and institutional life cycles developed within institutionalism. Second, given the narrow methodological orientation of the degrowth literature on global dependencies, the methodological debates within institutionalism about the applicability of formal models, such as system dynamics and agent-based modeling, could provide inspirations for a similar debate aimed at making the degrowth literature on this topic more pluralist in the methodological dimension. Finally, we referred to some examples to illustrate how institutionalist analyses of global dependencies and technological change could be useful for a degrowth-centered analysis of global structural interdependencies and their implications for a socio-ecological transformation towards degrowth.

Obviously, the paper left many tasks for future research. First of all, the focus was exclusively on how institutionalist theory could address blank spots in the academic degrowth discourse, not vice versa. This reversed direction is certainly worth being investigated. Moreover, and more importantly, the paper outlined many *possible* ways for how institutionalist scholars could contribute to the degrowth discourse, but did not *actually* contribute to this discourse itself. It is

our hope that this avenue will be quickly filled by future work, some of which will then hopefully have been inspired by this paper.

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