

## Draft Position Paper for [Postgrowth 2018](#) Prep Day at ULB, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2018.

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This position paper addresses practical contributions to degrowth and post-growth agendas of community-led initiatives for sustainability and climate change, and their relationships to research. Specifically, it addresses the prospects of constructive relationships that can both advance transformations to post-growth, and in particular the contributions of community-based action to achieving these, and prefigure post-growth forms of scholarship.

Central to the analysis behind this paper is the notion of commons as enacted, evolving alternatives to forms of social organisation based on increasing levels of private material (and other forms of) accumulation<sup>1</sup>; it characterises formations of the latter type as capitalist and growth-based formations without, for the sake of analytical simplicity, interrogating this generalisation. It takes as given the finding that capitalism, structural dependency upon growth, and social and ecological degradation are inseparable<sup>2</sup>, and therefore that a transition to sustainability and social equity is also a transition to both post-growth and post-capitalism.

Commons are, broadly speaking, all instances where social groups inclusively self-organise in order to regulate and administer shared use of any collective resource, whether tangible (e.g. land, energy, water) or intangible (e.g. knowledge, culture, social capacity)<sup>3 4 5</sup>. Traditional commons – usually land and other material goods held and managed in common by indigenous and/or traditional users – are a feature of all documented cases, historical and contemporary, where human groups self organise for sustainability and resilience<sup>6 7</sup>. Degrowth initiatives, in other words cases where people intentionally seek to meet their material and other needs in ways that do not require continual increases in material throughput, all involve some form or other of commoning. This interdependency of degrowth and commons is both empirical and logical: no counter-example of viable propositions for degrowth that do not involve commoning has ever been documented, nor is there any logical argument that could support the notion any such could exist.

If we accept the point that the essence of a post-growth transition is, broadly speaking, one from the predominance of capitalist (state and market) socio-economic formations to the predominance of commons, the central question becomes how a set of essentially capitalist institutions and processes (those that currently dominate all aspects of public life) can support the emergence, growth and consolidation of commons (which necessarily implies substantial contraction, if not demise, of the former). The two predominant forms of relationship between capital and commons – which underpin orthodox scientific recommendations as well as substantive relationships between state and private-sector actors and degrowth/commoning initiatives – are enclosure and co-optation. Both enclosure and co-optation, in different ways, undermine the transformative potential of such initiatives and instead appropriate them in the service of growth and capital.

Enclosure is the transfer of resources (tangible and/or intangible) from the realm of commons into state or market control. It helps sustain the illusion of growth – via absorption of externalities, making visible to fiscal accounting goods and material and non-material exchanges that previously took place in non-monetary forms, and direct expansion of capital and/or state influence and control. In relation to degrowth initiatives, it occurs when structural pressures force monetisation of activities or commodification of goods, and when capital draws on the commons domain as a source of innovation that can help sustain growth. The so-called ‘green growth’ agenda, involving perversities such as high-cost luxury housing developments masquerading as ‘ecovillages’, exemplifies this process.

Co-optation occurs when structural pressures oblige commoning initiatives – often under pressure from state actors - to conform to the dictates of markets and/or capital, either through material imperative or cultural pressure. Many, indeed most such initiatives reach a point where they find themselves in need of

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1. Di Angelis, M., 2017. *Omnia sunt comunia*. London: Zed Books.

2. e.g. Jackson, T., 2009. *Prosperity without growth*. London: Earthscan.

3. Ostrom, E., 1990. *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.

4. Ostrom, E., 2005. *Understanding institutional diversity*. Princeton University Press

5. Bromley, D.W. (Ed.), 1992. *Making the commons work*. San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies.

6. Berkes, F. (ed.), 1990. *Common property resources*.

7. Berkes, F. & C. Folke (eds.), 1998. *Linking social and ecological systems. Management practices and social mechanisms for building resilience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

institutional legitimacy, finance, or both, in order to advance their work. Most at this point experience a phenomenon known as coercive isomorphism: a pressure to conform to the requirements of incumbent organisations that can provide access to legitimacy and/or funds, in order to become both visible and legible, inevitably on terms that reflect the influence of capital and requirement for growth<sup>8</sup>. Co-optation also takes more subtle forms, in which degrowth initiatives compensate for deficiencies of growth-based formations in terms of their social and environmental performance, or provide the personal, social and/or ecological renewal necessary for growth regimes to persist.

A third form of interaction identified in recent literature on commons is structural coupling, in which commons creatively engage with – and in some cases are actively supported by – capital-based formations, in ways that support the continuation and growth of commons<sup>9</sup>. The general proposal being made in this paper is that structural coupling of this kind - to support the creation, growth and establishment of new commons able to deliver necessary and desired societal functions in sustainable, equitable and socially just fashion at lower levels of material throughput and not reliant on economic growth – become the main aim of existing institutions and bodies associated with growth-based regimes. The function of growth, and all its agents, thus becomes its/their own obsolescence and replacement with a dynamic and interconnected network of commons at all scales from the micro-social to the global.

A useful model for describing these various types of interrelationship is that of the Three Horizons developed by the International Futures Forum<sup>10</sup>. The First Horizon (H1) corresponds to the status quo: organisations structurally dependent upon and ideologically committed to growth (whether overtly or covertly) and operationally dedicated to its perpetuation. The Third Horizon (H3) represents the long-term goal of a sustainable and equitable society: in the analysis here, of diverse post-growth commons and interactions among these. The Second Horizon (H2) refers to the transitional organisations and processes that foster the emergence and eventual establishment of the Third Horizon. Numerous contemporary H3 and H2 organisations, approaches and initiatives already exist, respectively prefiguring the future post-growth society and the transition processes that lead us there from the current situation in which both H3 and H2 though are in all respects subordinate to H1.

In relation to research, it is obvious that the vast majority of current research takes place within H1 organisations and via H1 projects, is supported by H1 processes, and operates in order to perpetuate rather than replace the First Horizon. Growth is ideologically assumed as a precondition for achieving sustainability and social goals, as well as necessary and desirable in its own terms. Commons, including intellectual commons, are exploited as sources of intellectual capital, via either enclosure as unacknowledged sources of intellectual and social innovation, or co-optation as sources of data and/or vehicles for ‘impact’, both in terms instrumental to competition among academic institutions for funding and intellectual prestige. A small number of organisations, projects and/or individual researchers operate in H2 fashion, seeking to support directly existing H3 initiatives and so help enable transitions to post-growth. The difference maps onto the familiar distinction between Mode 1 (which makes a spurious claim to be detached and objective) and Mode 2 research (which makes clear its ideological and practical commitment to social change)<sup>11</sup>. I have recently suggested extending this typology to include a further Mode 3, which integrates itself within commons initiatives and employs their methodology, thus prefiguring post-growth forms of knowledge generation and mobilisation<sup>12</sup>.

These observations are all important context for the establishment, in 2014, of ECOLISE (European Community-Led Initiatives for a Sustainable Europe), and its specific relationship with research. ECOLISE was formed as a meta-network of national and international networks of community-led initiatives – predominantly but not exclusively associated with the ecovillage, permaculture and Transition movements – in response to the emerging need to collaborate and mobilise at European level. Among the key drivers behind its creation is the current state of the knowledge base on such initiatives: despite substantial recent research investment on the part of the EU and others, knowledge remains patchy and fragmented, and is not effectively mobilised for either policy influence or action. Recognising this, ECOLISE at its foundation

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8. Becker et al, forthcoming. The shaping of CBIs through resource dependence and coercive isomorphism: The case of legal organizational forms in Berlin. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*.

9. Di Angelis, M., 2017. *Omnia sunt comunia*. London: Zed Books.

10. Sharpe, B., 2013. *Three horizons. The patterning of hope*. Axminster: Triarchy Press.

11. Regeer, B. and J. Bunders, 2009. *Knowledge Co-creation: Interaction Between Science and Society*. Preliminary studies and background studies, number V.10e. Den Haag: RMNO.

12. Henfrey, T. W., 2018. Designing for resilience: permaculture as a transdisciplinary methodology in applied resilience research. *Ecology and Society* 23(2):33. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-09916-230233>

identified three interconnected core strategic pillars: Knowledge and Learning, Communication and Policy/Advocacy.

The ECOLISE Knowledge and Learning pillar takes a transdisciplinary approach, recognising the potential contributions of academic research (particularly Mode 2 but also to a degree and under some circumstances Mode 1) to practical action, the validity and importance of practitioner knowledge, and the prospect of constructive synergies arising from combining the two in Mode 3 collaborations. ECOLISE includes as members several research institutions committed to participatory working via Mode 2 orientations and with an interest in Mode 3, alongside its core membership of national and international representative organisations of community-led movements. Within the Knowledge and Learning pillar, researchers collaborate on an equal footing with bearers of non-academic forms of knowledge – practical, experiential, strategic, etc. - to generate, share and communicate knowledge that can inform practice and policy.

Established research activity in this field crosses numerous scholarly fields, including but by no means restricted to anthropology, human geography, environmental sciences, sustainability transitions, resilience theory, political ecology, innovation studies, sustainable consumption, alternative economics, and many more. Recent major EU investments in such research include completed FP7 projects such as BASE, TRANSIT, TESS, ARTS, PATHWAYS, GLAMURS and ongoing H2020 projects such as The GROW Observatory, ENERGISE, INSPIRE, UrbanA and ProsEU, many of which deploy (or attempt to deploy) Mode 2 inquiry, despite continuing marked bias in proposal evaluation against this. In addition, networks of community-led initiatives themselves have initiated, on scarce or zero resources, various practice-led Mode 3 initiatives like the Transition Research Network, Permaculture International Network and GEN (Global Ecovillage Network) Research Working Group.

To further advance the understanding and practice of Mode 3 scholarship, ECOLISE has begun development of a knowledge commons for community-led action on sustainability and climate change: a set of information resources, user and curator communities, and agreements and protocols for their use and further development<sup>13</sup>. This will become an open source facility for all interested parties within or connected with the post-growth, degrowth and related communities, both to support post-growth transitions by facilitating collaborative, decentralised and inclusive knowledge generation, and to explore and prefiguratively model post-growth forms of research and scholarship. The first phase, currently in progress, involves the compilation and synthesis of this currently disparate information in a single open-access and open source online resource. This will form the basis of a Status Report on Community-Led Action on Sustainability and Climate Change, due for initial release in early 2019 with updates anticipated every two or three years beyond that, subject to availability of resources<sup>14</sup>. The intention is to mobilise a wide group of researchers and practitioners in production of the Status Report and development and maintenance of the Status Report, extending an open invitation to all in the Degrowth research community to contribute to both content generation and strategic development.

Preliminary findings from the Status Report (which is currently in draft form) show compelling but frustratingly limited evidence of the potential, limitations and risks of community-led action, both as impetus for a societal transition to post-growth and source of working H3 examples of how post-growth society might work in practice. Considering the movements most prominent in Ecolise, permaculture provides a viable, and fast-evolving, methodology for restructuring societal metabolism via appropriate social and ecological design, in order that provision of human needs becomes regenerative rather than destructive of ecological, social and cultural value. Ecovillages, intentional communities often designed according to permaculture principles, support levels of wellbeing and reported life satisfaction comparable to or higher than in wider society at far lower levels of material consumption, largely through increased emphasis on social (and to a lesser degree natural and human) capital. Transition translates these methods and achievements to established communities of place as grassroots responses to local manifestations of global crises, intertwined with related movements in local/regional food production, energy sovereignty, solidarity economics, complementary currencies, and many more. Existing research on these and related movements demonstrates substantial realised and potential contributions both to implementing high-level policy initiatives like the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals, along with key social and economic policies, and in doing so to challenging the premises on which they are based, demonstrating both the viability and necessity of moving beyond growth via establishment of new commons. Existing research also

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13. [http://wiki.ecolise.eu/index.php/A\\_knowledge\\_commons\\_for\\_community-led\\_action\\_on\\_sustainability\\_and\\_climate\\_change](http://wiki.ecolise.eu/index.php/A_knowledge_commons_for_community-led_action_on_sustainability_and_climate_change)

14. [http://wiki.ecolise.eu/index.php/Status\\_report](http://wiki.ecolise.eu/index.php/Status_report)

confirms the risk alluded to above, that such initiatives become co-opted by incumbent regimes in instrumental fashion, compensating for inaction on the part of government and business or even mitigating contradictory agendas such as 'green growth'.

Despite the volume of research effort, the evidence base is both insufficient and inadequately deployed for either policy or practice. Research to date has been piecemeal and uncoordinated, rarely responsive to the interests and needs of community-led initiatives and movements themselves and even more rarely drawing on their capacity as knowledge and learning communities. No systematic inventory of the numbers, nature, distribution and impacts of community-led initiatives has been undertaken, let alone detailed examination of their nature as commons, and for many places, particularly Southern and Eastern Europe, little or no information exists at all. Predominance of Mode 1 approaches and consequent disconnection of practitioners from research effort means potentially useful academic knowledge is inaccessible to practice, and much informal knowledge unreported and undocumented. Isolation from formal expertise in advocacy and policy formulation means policy implications are attended weakly, if at all.

Further research, particularly via Mode 2 and Mode 3 approaches, is urgently needed to document more comprehensively and robustly the extent, nature, achievements and limitations of community-led action, prospects for it to contribute to wider transformation to post-growth via interactions with existing and emerging initiatives at multiple levels and scales, the barriers and structural constraints to both local action and wider engagement, and strategies and measures to overcome these. Such research needs to be conducted in intimate dialogue with both local practice and initiatives to effect change at wider levels, such as ECOLISE's policy pillar and the Post-growth conference. It also needs to take place within a concerted strategic effort to shift existing research institutions to an H2 orientation, and to recognise, endorse and support emerging H3 research initiatives. This will require substantial changes in the ways research agendas are developed, implemented, evaluated and applied within the Framework Programmes and other mechanisms. Stronger emphasis on addressing key societal problems and exploring and implementing, via action research, transformative solutions, is needed, supported by increased allocation of resources. Greater civil society input is needed into development of work programmes, allocation and disbursement of funds, and execution of research and implementation of findings, via participatory and inclusive structures at all levels and in all aspects of the process. In short, we do not simply need policy change to support and more effectively leverage the achievements of community-led initiatives, and the many familiar proposals for structural changes in macro-economic and social policy that could help enable this, we also need change in the ways knowledge is created and mobilised for policy change.