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Structural Constraints to Approaching an Ecological Utopia

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Declaration

I, Sølve Eide Andersen, declare that this thesis is a result of my investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

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Abstract

Economic growth is a fundamental value of market economics that now infiltrates nearly all aspects of Western society. Today this economic system has an increasingly global reach where other pressing issues are pushed aside in favour of increasing profits in the market. At the same time, our global civilisation is in peril as environmental destruction and economic collapse loom on the horizon. Additionally, widespread civil unrest is an added threat caused by the inability of governments and institutions to respond to the consequences of unbridled growth in a satisfying manner for the people affected. The purpose of this thesis is to look at the alternative solution of *degrowth* and interpret how degrowth actors imagine the transformative potential of structure and agency in creating a degrowth society. This is done by analysing three publications from scientific journals that address degrowth. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory is used as a framework to analyse the various perspectives taken by the degrowth movement regarding the interplay between structure and agency. This research seeks to provide useful insight into the various ideas presented by the degrowth movement for anyone interested in understanding the potential of individual agents and social movements to achieve structural change.

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Preface

One of the core principles for validity in interpretive research design is transparency (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Therefore, I will be as transparent as possible about my background and personal convictions that may make me biased in any direction, thus influencing how this thesis is conducted.

I wrote my bachelor's thesis about the Zapatistas in Mexico and post-development theory, so this is not the first time I involve myself academically with radical social movements and literature that challenge mainstream thinking about the purpose of economic development and the meaning of the 'good life'. Although interpretive research methods contest the possibility of researcher objectivity (Schwartz-Shea, 2012), I should point out that on these questions I am in no way objective. This bias has led me to choose this research topic and may have played a role during the research process. With that in mind, it is up to the reader to assess how much the trustworthiness of my researched has been compromised by my personal bias.

The structure of the research should make this easier, because the research does not seek to take sides in a debate on the merits of degrowth and transition. Rather, it seeks to understand the content of various degrowth thoughts.

Abbreviations

EE	– Environmental Economics
EV	– Environmental Values
GDP	– Gross Domestic Product
IR	– International Relations
JCP	– Journal of Cleaner Production
SSE	– Steady State Economics
UK	– United Kingdom
US	– United States
VSM	– Voluntary Simplicity Movement

“My optimism is based on the certainty that this civilization is about to collapse.
My pessimism lies on the things that are dragging us down in its fall.”

Kirkpatrick Sale (Kelly, 1995)

1. Introduction

The consumption-driven economic growth enjoyed by Western economies in the period after WWII has brought with it great material prosperity for the majority of people in Western economies. The average citizens indulge themselves in an excess of previously scarce food, clothing and fashionable accessories, non-stop use of high-tech electronics and media, and the convenience of high-speed transportation. If we step back three generations, mere survival was a task that required intensive and time-demanding manual labour. The material welfare enjoyed in affluent countries today might have sounded like utopian fiction a century ago; too unbelievable to become reality at the shift of the millennium. Despite the prosperity many people enjoy throughout the world, modern life has also created a range of new problems, both for the natural environment and the individual, and civilisation is ripe for a transition (Capra, 1987).

One of the challenges we are faced with is environmental degradation and climate change. Another challenge is the overhanging threat of a global financial crisis due to unprecedented amounts of public and private debt fuelled by low interest rates (Demaria, 2013). This is cause for concern in economies that depend on increased material consumption. Furthermore, we face an increasing gap between rich and poor, and individuals struggling with depression and suicide, alienation, anxiety, social pressure, and a feeling of powerlessness (Ateljevic, 2013).

The economic system of whose benefits we have come to enjoy so much depends on continued expansion. Simultaneously, our consumption's toll on the environment has put us on course towards the collapse of our civilisation as we know it (Ophuls, 2011). According to Ophuls (2011), civilisations tend to collapse before they completely eradicate the natural environment, because of the law of diminishing returns, i.e. the last drop of oil will not be pumped because the extraction costs of oil will amount to more than its economic value. The inevitable collapse of modern civilisation is not some wild pessimistic speculation, but well supported by historians who have examined the rise and fall of known civilisations that have existed throughout history (Tainter, 1990; Spengler, 2006; Quigley, 1961). Once a civilisation reaches its height, it starts to decline and eventually pass out of existence either due to degrading the natural environment (Ophuls, 2011) or from loss of social cohesion and forward drive (Unwin, 1934). As Quigley (1961) puts it, when the change in the natural environment becomes too comprehensive, the human species does not go extinct like the dinosaurs, but it *adopts* a new culture that fits within the new reality. The forces that lead us

on to a path to destruction are largely unstoppable, however, one civilisation is always followed by another (Ophuls, 2011). This time however, we face not just collapse, but the possibility of extinction (Capra, 1987). This thesis is not concerned with preserving the consumption-based civilisation, which Ophuls argues is now a global civilisation, but focuses on the transition to what is to follow. Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, urges us to: “take seriously the risk of a global systems breakdown. Together we have the resources and the new scientific and technological knowledge to prevent this. Above all, the challenge is to find the will and momentum to work together for a shared future.” (Can, 2018). The lack of will and momentum is indeed one of many challenges to overcome.

1.1. The Research Problem

Sustainable development has been the solution to the threats mentioned above that has garnered most attention by the media and it has been widely accepted by politicians and governments all over the world as a viable solution to many of modern civilisation’s most pressing issues. Sustainable development is defined in the “Brundtland rapport” *Our Common Future* as: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 16). In other words, a remarkably vague definition, which may help explain why the idea of sustainable development has remained popular for several decades. Further, the rapport reads: “But technology and social organisation can both be managed to make way for a new era of economic growth.” (1987, p. 16). It is this focus on growth critiques of the sustainable development model take issue with. They argue that any model that depends on economic growth is inherently unsustainable (Georgescu-Rogen, 1971). The problem with continuous exponential growth is that it eventually depletes natural resources. There are countless suggestions on how to tackle this problem, and they can be grouped into two separate approaches. The first approach is a technological utopia where technological innovation fixes our problems. In the second vision, an ecological utopia, consuming less enables us to meet our needs. For reasons outlined in chapter two, the focus of this research is on ecological solutions. A proposition that fits well with the ecological solutions, as opposed to technological solutions, is degrowth. Degrowth is a path that proposes radical change to society and the economic system with the purpose of preserving ecosystems (Demaria, 2013). Degrowth challenges the idea that environmental degradation can be decoupled from economic growth (Demaria, 2013). Degrowth also seeks to change the values and ideas that are commonly held by the public regarding consumption and lifestyle.

Although change is needed on the individual level, the above-mentioned problems are systemic and thus require a transformation of the political economic system rather than a reform within it (Speth, 2012; Kallis, Kerschner & Martinez-Alier, 2012).

Ophuls writes: “Although it might be theoretically possible for the human economy to mimic the natural economy it would involve a radical transformation of civilization as we know it.” (Ophuls, 2012, p. 29). It is precisely such a radical transformation and its implications with which this thesis is concerned, more precisely the imagined power of structure and agency in transforming to a civilisation founded on degrowth principles. The degrowth approach offers a blueprint of such a radical transformation of civilisation, but it will not be brought about without difficulty because it will face strong opposition. As my research will show later in this thesis, the main opposition comes from governments, corporations, and people in general, because they see degrowth as a threat; governments as a threat to their power, corporations as a threat to their existence, and people as a threat to their lifestyle, well-being, and identity.

1.2. The Structure-Agency Debate

In the social sciences there is a divide between those who think structure is responsible for shaping an individual’s attitude and behaviour, and those who believe that individuals have agency and can create and recreate structures. For example, functionalism and structuralism emphasise the importance of the larger social structure over the individual, as opposed to hermeneutic thought which emphasise the importance of human beings as purposive agents (Giddens, 1984). Agency means that individuals have free will to choose their actions. The opposite point of view is that the social structure determines the behaviour of the individual, meaning that we act the way we do because we are socialised to do so.

The various structures in our society can both enable or constrain individual action. When waking up in the morning, it is good to know that we can expect the organisation of society to appear unchanged from yesterday. We greet each other the same way, drive on the same side of the road, our money maintains its value, we know how to behave in a socially acceptable manner, and the rule of law is in place. If this were not so, walking out the front door would be a surprising event every morning, never knowing what the world would look like that day. While these structures are undeniably important to the function of a society, they simultaneously also constrain individual agency and the extent of their rigidity makes it difficult to change them. Imagine you are concerned about the degradation of the natural

environment and its effect on people and your goal is to drastically change society in as little time as possible. To do this, you wish to change the values in your society, the setup of the economic system, and consumption patterns. In that case, structures begin to show their true rigidness and powerful influence on attitudes and behaviour. From that point of view, they can be perceived as constraining action rather than enabling it. This thesis looks at the relationship between structures and agency from a degrowth perspective.

The main conceptual framework used when analysing the findings in this thesis is Giddens' structuration theory. Structuration theory is an attempt to bridge the two opposing sides in the structure-agency debate. From this point of view, structure and agency are dependent on each other, and feed into each other in a reinforcing loop. In this theory, neither structure nor agency is seen as being more important than the other. Structuration theory balances the divide between structure and agency. This framework is useful to answer my research questions, because I am interested in both the power of structures on individual behaviour as well as the power of individuals to influence those structures.

1.3. The Research Gap Addressed in this Thesis

The changes promoted by the degrowth movement require large changes in both the economic structure as well as in the culture that surrounds it, i.e. norms, values, and rules. In this thesis, the focus lies on understanding how degrowth activists and scholars see the possibility of changes to- or within the existing structures. The research also explores how structures both enable and constrain human agency in transforming society to the will of the agent. Drawing on Giddens' structuration theory, I aim to shed light on the main structural challenges the degrowth movement is up against. In the end, the goal of this research is to add to the literature that seeks to explain structural change, to understand what structures appear to be the main obstacles for the degrowth movement to realise its goals. Identifying the difficulties in achieving social change is a step in the direction of overcoming them.

This research seeks to fill the gap in the literature on how various approaches to degrowth perceive of the transformative power of structure and agency to achieve a degrowth society. There is great diversity in approaches within the degrowth movement and they hold very different views on the importance of structure and agency. By doing this, I hope to bring more attention to the question of what the most useful steps to approach an ecologically sustainable society are. It is widely accepted by many governments, political parties, and citizens that we face a great number of issues, both environmentally and socially. However, there is great disagreement what can be done to solve these issues. In my research I address

numerous solutions by analysing three special issue publications from scientific journals that cover the degrowth topic, and from that the reader should be able to gain insight into what solutions are likely to work and what solution are unlikely to work.

1.4. Methodological Framework

This research project intends to gain a deeper understanding of the degrowth movement, particularly its worldview and its position within the economic- and social structure and hence their capacity or lack thereof to change those structures.

The research conducted in this thesis follows the logic of an interpretive research design. In interpretivist research, as opposed to positivist research, human beings are seen as agents that create the world around them and the meaning of everything within it (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). As such, my research does not seek to draw conclusions that are universal truths. Instead, I analyse the content of text in order to extract the meaning of what a selection of authors think from their specific context. The conclusions I draw should be seen as reflecting this rather than as an attempt to find positivist objective answers to reality.

The data analysed in this research is collected from the three journals Journal of Cleaner Production, Ecological Economics, and Environmental Values. Each of these journals published a special edition covering the topic degrowth in 2010, 2012, and 2013 respectively. Together, 34 articles were part of the total dataset (see Appendices). Based on the assumption that current modern civilization is in dire need of transition to a more ecologically sustainable way of organisation, I ask the question:

How is the transformative potential of agency and structure imagined by the degrowth movement?

1.5. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is comprised of six chapters. Following the introduction, the second chapter provides theoretical background on several concepts that relate to the research questions, including the main concept for my research: *Degrowth*. The third chapter presents Giddens' structuration theory. This is the conceptual framework I use to analyse the findings. The fourth chapter is the methodological approach. This chapter explains the methodological assumptions underlying this research, the chosen methodological approach, and explains and justifies the approach to gathering data. In chapter five I analyse the findings. This analysis is split up into four sections, each addressing the main research question and sub-questions from

a different angle. The first section is on economic structures, as this is the most frequently mentioned structural constraint across all the data. The second section is on social structures. The third and fourth sections include findings that discuss tools to overcome the structure and the relevance of agency in doing so. In the sixth chapter I answer the research questions and conclude the thesis.

2. Theoretical Background

This chapter presents key concepts and theories that are used throughout the thesis. This chapter provides a brief introduction to these concepts and theories, and it provides a basis for the reader to better make sense of the analysis and discussion. The concepts addressed in this chapter are utopia, social engineering, transition, and finally degrowth. The concepts presented in this chapter are selected because of their relevance to the research topic. The chapter is divided into three main parts. The first section highlights the difference between two ways of striving for a utopian future. The second section presents the idea of social engineering. The third section presents theories that help us understand how and why transitions in society occur and discuss different approaches, particularly revolutionary- and reformist change.

The body of theory presented below that informs my research and sets the stage for the subsequent analysis does of course to some degree reflect my personal worldview. At the same time, none of the theories are niche in their respective field, meaning they simultaneously reflect the points of view of many highly esteemed IR scholars, historians, sociologists, psychologists, and environmental scientists.

2.1. The Usefulness and Pitfalls of Utopianism

Utopia stems from the Greek ‘ou’ meaning ‘not’ and ‘topos’ meaning ‘place’, in other words an unreachable place. It is commonly used to describe something as being too perfect to be attainable on Earth; a paradise, the perfect organisation of society. The word *utopia* was first used by Thomas More (1997) in his work *Utopia* where he outlines what he envisages an ideal organisation of society to be. His utopia is far from what most of us would describe as a utopia today as it includes every household to keep slaves.

Using the word utopia can seem problematic if one accepts the idea that it is unattainable. Most religions tell us that paradise is only attainable in the afterlife. Numerous attempts have been made at creating utopian societies. The Third Reich was built on a vision of a perfect world. Similarly, communist ideology aims at achieving what is akin to a communist utopia and was largely attempted by Stalin (de Geus, 2002). Visions of utopia are frequent in political ideology. Many proposed blueprints seem to imply a utopian future is within reach if only the constraining structures were removed. Too often though, some of the constraints to utopia are classified as undesirable groups of people; the physically disabled,

the poor, the wealthy, political elites, political opposition, and those who do not wish to conform to the beliefs of that specific utopia. These attempts at utopia were instigated by people who in their way sought to improve society and create political perfection (de Geus, 2002).

From this point of view, it would appear Peter Hitchens is onto something when saying: “Utopia is only approached across a sea of blood, and you never get there.” (The Student Post, 2016, 3:00). Even if we were to achieve a utopian society – preferably without committing democide in the process – how likely is it that such a society would last? The Buddhist term *Anicca*, meaning *impermanence*, signifies that nothing stays permanent. Even a perfect society is unlikely to remain perfect forever. Nevertheless, that does not mean that pursuing utopian ideas is to no avail. de Geus (2002) calls ecological utopia a “navigational compass” and sees this as a source of inspiration for current policy makers.

2.2. Ecological Utopia and Technological Utopia

I use de Geus’ distinction between two solutions to the issues of overconsumption by which utopia can be approached. The first is a technological utopia and the second is an ecological utopia.

In a technological utopia, technological innovation will enable us to overcome the problem of resource scarcity and enjoy lives of excess (de Geus, 2002). Complete recycling will solve the problem of depleting natural resources. Furthermore, mining asteroids can eventually supply us even more precious minerals. With the use of technology, we can also control the level of greenhouse gas emissions, manipulate the weather to our advantage, and harness all the energy we need from the sun. Applying existing technology to solve environmental problems are popular with politicians and have resulted in some great business ventures. One example from my home country illustrates this well. In Norway, tax cuts on electrical cars have helped fuel an immense growth in sales of electrical cars in the last decade. Rarely do we hear politicians encourage applying existing *ideology* to reduce emissions, for example encouraging less consumption. Less consumption comes with a diminished Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Technological solutions on the other hand allow growth to continue; regardless of growth being conventional or “green”. A problem with technological solutions is that they require energy and natural resources to be created. Technological solutions, while being alluring, are not able to overcome the second law of

thermodynamics which states that the quality or usefulness of energy tends to decrease with each use (Ophuls, 2011). In the ecological utopia this issue is overcome by other means.

To ecological utopia thinkers, future needs of energy and natural resources will be met by lower demand (de Geus, 2002). Patrick Sale, quoted before the introduction, is a Neo-Luddite, meaning he rejects modern technology. In an ecological utopia, technology is not rejected, but it is also not imagined as a solution like it would be in a technological utopia. An ecological utopia seeks to balance human life with the rest of nature by lowering consumption of material goods and thus eliminating the need for technology to fix problems that stem from overconsumption.

The relative lack in popularity of ecological utopian thinking, compared to technological utopias, surely have numerous explanations. Relatively few people applaud the idea of significantly lowering their consumption. Therefore, putting hope in future technology to save us is the preferred choice for many people because it allows us to maintain our way of life. Günther Anders' term *Apokalypse-Blindheit* (apocalypse blindness) may explain the inability or unwillingness to come to terms with how our individual actions and organisation of society is slowly leading to our collapse. To Anders, technology led to distancing us from the results of our actions, effectively leaving us blind to our own apocalypse (Alvis, 2017).

2.3. Social Engineering

I bring in social engineering because there is an element of it to multiple degrowth approaches and approaches in general that seek to create a certain type of society.

What drives us to reproduce certain structures over others? Are structures constant and unchangeable because they are based on human biology? Or are structures artificially created and thus open to change? The answer to these questions will influence a person's stance on the structure-agency debate. Social engineering gives food for thought on the issue.

Social engineering means to intentionally influence attitudes and behaviour in a population. This can be done by government institutions or private organisations alike. The purpose of social engineering is to make people think and behave in a certain way, serving the agenda of the engineer. Social engineering is not inherently good or bad, but a tool that can be used for multiple ends. Here are two examples to illustrate the tool in use. First, government-run campaigns that try to discourage smoking or to change the public's attitude

about the use of seat belts in cars, both with the intent of improving health and lowering health expenditures. Second, the famous social engineer Edward Bernays is best known for popularising smoking among women, but he also wrote about how to effectively influence what he called *the irrational masses* of people by taking advantage of crowd psychology to the benefit of the social engineer (Bernays, 1923; Bernays, 1928). These examples illustrate how social engineering can be used for multiple purposes.

Karl Popper adds to the debate on what is the best way to engineer society. He contributes a new viewpoint on social engineering. Popper differentiates between *piecemeal* social engineering and *utopian* social engineering. He distinguishes the two: “The piecemeal engineer will, accordingly, adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good” (Popper, 2011, pp. 147-157). To Popper, the piecemeal engineering is the only option that can lead to improvement of society in the long run.

2.4. Cultural Hegemony and the Superstructure

One person who argues that social structure is purposefully engineered is Antonio Gramsci. From Gramsci, two concepts are particularly relevant to understand the sort of structural challenges a movement like the degrowth movement is up against. He came up with two concepts, cultural *hegemony* and *superstructure*. Expanding on the classical Marxist notion that the capitalist elite (usually called *the bourgeoisie*) holds the political power, he claims that the bourgeoisie maintain their power by creating and recreating institutions that support their position of power, i.e. “the rules of the game” in society. This is effectively done in a capitalist society. Robert Cox (1983) writes that the bourgeoisie leadership was accepted with some necessary concessions made to the subordinate classes, especially social democracy which serve the purpose of making the subordination more acceptable and to preserve capitalism. This way then, the capitalist elite did not have to be the ones ruling, because “the administrative, executive and coercive apparatus of government was in effect constrained by the hegemony of the leading class” (Cox, 1983). Furthermore, the elite does not need to coerce the wider population with violence to make them accept the status quo, because the ideology that supports the hegemonic culture is accepted and adopted by the masses. To Gramsci, this meant that that looking solely at the government was not sufficient to understand the state, a view that may serve in analysing the data in this thesis.

The cultural hegemony and the institutions that support it make up the *superstructure*. Gramsci borrowed the term from Marx and divided the superstructure into political- and civil society (Morera, 1990). Political society preserves the supremacy of the ruling class through violence. Civil society achieves the same as political society, but through other means. Civil society, comprised of all private organisations, including newspapers and churches, organises consensus (Morera, 1990, p. 28). By maintaining hegemony – organised consensus – civil society enables the ruling class to remain in power without the active use of violence.

I do not intend to engage in a debate on the merits of communism and capitalism, but the idea of a group actively working to create institutions in society to preserve a system that supports their hegemonic position is of great relevance to the research topic in this thesis.

2.5. Theories on Transition

Transitions can be linear or circular. Similarly, various movements for transition imagine transition taking place at different speeds and through different means. Reformism seeks to reform a system from within without completely replacing it with another. The Fabian Society, a socialist organisation, is a movement whose principles are based on reformist ideas (Fabian Society, 2018). Although the goals may be the same as those of more radical movements, the approaches are vastly different. In contrast to reformism stands revolutionary socialism. Revolutionary socialism is an approach that argues revolution is necessary to achieve structural changes in society, especially in the transition from a capitalist society to a socialist society. Such a revolution entails dismantling existing structures, similar to what was done when the ruling political class was beheaded during the French Revolution.

The French Revolution is an example of revolutionary socialism carried out. A problem with this revolutionary way, besides the murdering of people, is that unless a viable alternative is offered to replace the removed structures, society can easily fall into chaos. Revolutionaries tend to have the belief that destruction is necessary to create something new.

Moving on, let us look at how the idea of transition is instigated in the first place. Anthony Wallace offers a framework for understanding how it comes about.

Wallace argues that all approaches to transform cultural systems are “characterised by a uniform process” (Wallace, 1956). He calls the process ‘revitalisation’, hence the movements are all called revitalisation movements. Most of the time culture-change occurs slowly in a gradual “chain-reaction effect” where one thing affects the other and so forth, but

this change does not happen deliberately, and takes part over years and generations (Wallace, 1956). With the deliberate actions of a revitalisation movement, however, the culture of a system can change in one generation. Wallace defines the movement as a “conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (1956, p. 265). Wallace identifies several steps the revitalisation movement must go through. First, members of a society perceive the culture they live in as being a cultural system. Second, they no longer consider that cultural system satisfactory, although they may have done so in the past. Third, they develop a new cultural system that they think will be more satisfactory for the members of their society and they seek to have it replace the old one.

This is only possible if assuming a great level of individual agency to generate change from within the system. This is largely based on the idea that social reality is socially constructed by interactions between people.

Some writers have suggested that the consumption based modern lifestyle and the Western liberal democracy is the final form of human organisation of society. For example, Francis Fukuyama (1992) saw the emergence of Western liberal democracy as possibly being the end of sociocultural evolution; he called it the *end of history*. In a similar vein, the *Stages of Economic Growth* model (Rostow, 1959) claims that all countries go through five stages of growth in a linear fashion before ending at high mass consumption. From a Western point of view, it may seem as if we have reached the end of our sociocultural evolution. Most citizens enjoy peace and prosperity, high levels of individual freedom, security, welfare support from the government, and the ability to enjoy a wide range of culture. In the brief timespan of a human life, it can be difficult to observe any significant changes taking place. But there is at least one important lesson history teaches us. The first lesson is observed throughout human history, and well-illustrated by this quote from Heraclitus: “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man”. Braudel (1995) describes that history is constantly developing, despite its at times appearing standstill. In other words, the world never remains constant. This line of thought is further supported by Sorokin’s argument that history occurs in a more cyclic way rather than a linear way (Capra, 1987). The implications of this for my research is that structures do not remain constant but are subject to change.

2.6. The Degrowth Movement

The degrowth movement is a social movement that seeks to transform society, particularly the economic system, to create an economy that is not dependent on growth to function (D’Alisa, G., Demaria, F. & Kallis, G., 2014). The movement rejects consumerism and the growth ideal intertwined with capitalism. This is because they recognise that the current economic model exists in disharmony with the global environment. As an alternative, they suggest changes based on ecological economics which sees the economic system as a minor part of a large global environment on which it is dependent. Only an economic system which recognises this and works within the ecological limits of the environment will be sustainable. The movement’s ideology is based on the premise that we can achieve human prosperity without having economic growth. A diminished level of consumption, from the degrowth movement point of view, does not equal a lower level of well-being. On the contrary, an increased focus on non-material elements of life, such as more time devoted to social relations, more time for leisure, pursuing personal and spiritual growth, music, art, and connecting with one’s local community is thought to increase personal satisfaction and mental well-being for the individual. On top of this comes the benefits from not polluting the environment and destroying our ecological support systems.

Lowering consumption to increase well-being is not a novel idea by any means. Simple living as a means to a richer cultural and spiritual life has been an ideal to countless historical figures, including Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Aldous Huxley and Lao Tzu (Quilley, 2013), but the term *décroissance* (degrowth) was taken in use by French intellectuals as recently as in the 1970s, not long after the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth* (Muraca, 2013). However, degrowth writers, especially Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1971), saw the *Limits to Growth* as too limited in its scope because it only advocates zero growth, because even zero growth keeps us on a declining path. Georgescu-Roegen therefore argued that degrowth was necessary before establishing a level of zero growth, such as Daly’s proposed *Steady State Economics* (SSE) (Daly, 1997). Despite the inability of even SSE to solve the pressing issues, approaches that allow “sustainable growth” are popular. The United Nations and most state leaders rallied behind the proposed solutions emanating from the Brundtland report *Our Common Future* (Brundtland, 1987). The proposed solution to environmental issues is ‘sustainable development’. The idea that we can pursue sustainable development, or ‘green growth’ and a ‘green economy’ is popular with most politicians, international economic institutions, and the commoners, but is challenged by degrowth

scholars (Demaria, 2013; Muraca, 2013). Georgescu-Roegen asked: “Will mankind listen to any program that implies a constriction of its addiction to exosomatic comfort?” (1975, p. 379). This is of course a crucial question, because it does not matter how ingenious the solutions if there is not enough will to change.

The main critique of Georgescu-Roegen stems from his misunderstanding of the third law of thermodynamics. He thought entropy on energy worked similarly on material objects, but critiques show that perfect recycling of material resources is possible, and no material resources would need to be lost if there is enough energy from an exogenous source like the sun (Ayres, 1998). This way, a solar economy can solve the problem of the second law of thermodynamics. Nevertheless, the perpetual recycling of material resources seems more a theoretical possibility than a practical one and it still only pushes the problems of an economy that is growth-dependent into the future (Dobson, 2013). The potential of technological innovation is a debated topic in the degrowth movement, but degrowth actors universally question the reliance on technology as a way to overcome the problems entropy and scarcity pose to infinite economic growth (Demaria, 2013).

In classical economic theory the term *market failure* describes a situation where the operations of a market are inefficient, leading to a loss in welfare due to, for example, externalities. Externalities can be environmental degradation and pollution which are not included in the price of a product. Ecological economics, however, sees these externalities not as a market failure, but as a systematic way by which market agents make their profit, to the detriment of other agents, present or future.

Degrowth is in many ways intertwined with activism. There are several types of activism that fits under the degrowth umbrella. The various types of activism can be grouped into three types of activism that in their own ways try to bring about a transition based on degrowth principles. Demaria (2013) divides them into: “opposition, building alternatives (creation of new institutions) and reformism (actions within existing institutions to create conditions for societal transformation) – from local to global levels” (Demaria, 2013).

Oppositional activism can take the form of campaigns to stop the expansion of industry that is particularly harmful to the environment and society. Demaria lists a few examples: “demonstrations, boycotts, civil disobedience, direct action and protest songs.” (2013, p. 201). Frequently observed examples of this are people tying themselves to trees to stop the destruction of forest areas or people protesting the exploitation of animals.

Building alternatives is a different approach than oppositional activism. This approach seeks not to challenge and dismantle that which is, but to create something new that is better and can take its place. Examples of this is the promotion of: “cycling, reuse, vegetarianism or veganism, co-housing, agro-ecology, eco-villages, solidarity economy, consumer cooperatives, alternative (so called ethical) banks or credit cooperatives, decentralised renewable energy cooperatives.” (Demaria, 2013, p. 201). This is further elaborated on in the analysis.

There is disagreement in the degrowth movement to what extent current structures and institutions must be opposed in a shift to a degrowth society. Those in favour of a reformist approach to degrowth argue that maintaining and working with existing institutions is necessary and even beneficial (Demaria, 2013). To explain how degrowth can be pursued by reformist means, Demaria gives the example of radical organic farmers who use computers and cars. Nevertheless, as my analysis will show, reformism is by some rejected as a useful approach in achieving degrowth. Participating in either of these approaches to degrowth does not imply exclusion from participating in others. Activists can also be involved in building alternatives and they can work with reforming institutions at the same time.

In a paper on degrowth, Hamilton writes: “The observations made in this paper apply to affluent countries only, although many developing countries are rapidly evolving into societies with the same characteristics.” (2010, p. 571). This contextual assumption is the same in most cases within this thesis when degrowth is mentioned – it is in the context of affluent Western countries and people. At the same time, the degrowth concept draws heavily on post-development theory, and with many non-Western countries rapidly developing, degrowth is increasingly a relevant concept for larger parts of the world.

I frequently use the term *degrowth movement* throughout this paper. This does not refer to any united group of people who all agree on the same things, but is a general term meant to capture the diversity of actors and alternatives that challenge the growth-based organisation of the economy and society. As the analysis makes evident, there are significant differences in how authors think about the possibility of transition to a degrowth society.

3. Conceptual Framework

This section presents a set of theories on structures and agency, first introducing the idea of invisible social structures as a crucial component of society. Second, the chapter presents the theory of *social constructivism*, and finally Giddens' *structuration theory*. Structuration theory is a theoretical approach that aims to bridge the structure-agency divide and serves as the conceptual framework that underlies this thesis' research.

The theories presented below do by no means adequately cover the multitude of theories on structure and agency. The theories are chosen because they represent some of the core ideas within the IR field and sociological theory, and they approach the idea of structure from different but mutually supporting angles that help us understand structures on several levels. In sociology, there is a multitude of theories that explain human behaviour. Most of these theories share the view that our thoughts and our behaviour is a product of social conditioning, i.e. leaning more to the *nurture* than *nature* argument.

Different theories emphasise different influences as the source of human behaviour. In sociology, structure and agency determine social phenomena, but different schools of thought emphasise the relative importance of structure and agency differently, leading to what is called the *structure-agency debate*. On one hand, structure is thought to be of greatest importance, leaving agency to be merely a result of the social structure.

In structural-consensus theory, human behaviour is learned through socialization. *Culture* describes the rules that govern the ways of thinking and behaving for an individual in a given society (Jones, Bradbury & Le Boutillier, 2011). These rules can come in the form of norms, rules, laws, and conventions. These, then, structure thought and action, all through various means and strength. From here on, these can be considered synonymous with *structures*. Thus, this is a simple explanation of how structures shape society. Because they are not material, social structures of this kind can easily be dismissed as insignificant in comparison with "real" structures such as buildings and roads, but they are at least equally effective in determining people's attitudes and behaviour. This thesis is concerned with similar "invisible" structures.

Structural-Consensus Theory, like many sociological theories, takes an all-structure view of how social life is organised. On the other hand, there are theories that focus on the agency of the individual in interaction with structures. The more agency-centred standpoint

holds that agents can exercise their agency despite the structures. For example, Action Theory stresses that structures depend on individuals and do not exist without people (Jones et al., 2011). We find a similar view of reality on a larger scale in IR theory.

In IR, differing worldviews determine the way structures are understood, how they come into creation, and to what degree or whether they can be transformed. In IR, the theory of social constructivism states that state relations are not predetermined to take a certain form. Rather, in the words of Alexander Wendt (1992), the rules that structure the interactions and relationships of states are socially constructed, i.e. they do not exist prior to human interaction. Accepting the idea of social constructivism, it follows that the organisation of state relations can be transformed, and also for the organisation of society of a state and smaller communities within it.

From the agency-centred point of view, emphasis is put on the individual's ability to create and recreate the world. To explain the driving force behind civilisation, Durant (2010) argues that the driving forces behind civilisation is human nature and our instincts. Because of this, humans will, and have always through history, followed the same patterns by and large. From this point of view, society is not a result of a pre-existing social structure, but a result of human biology. This can easily turn into a "chicken or the egg" question: does society influence individuals, or does individuals influence society? Structuration theory provides an answer.

3.1. Structuration Theory

Recognising the importance on both structure and agency in explaining social phenomena, Giddens developed his *structuration theory*. This theory tries to reconcile functionalism and structuralism with the hermeneutic approaches (Giddens, 1984). Giddens shows that structure can both enable and constrain individual action. Structuration Theory provides the core theoretical framework with which data is analysed in this thesis. Below is a more detailed exposition of structuration theory and Giddens' view on structure and agency.

In Giddens' *structuration theory*, social phenomena do not consist solely on individuals randomly deciding what to do. Individual action is shaped by social forces, but not entirely. Structuration theory states that individual agency and structure are in a relationship where one feed into the other in a continuous loop. In other words, repeated individual acts produce and reproduce social structures. From this point of view, structures are very much a real thing (think of rules, norms, and laws) but by changing their decisions,

ignoring - or walking away from structures, or different ways of behaviour, individuals can transform structures.

In structuration theory, agency does not refer to the individual's intention to act in a certain way, but the individual's capability to act the way he or she wants. An important factor to determine that agency was in play to influence an event is that the individual was always free to act differently. Hence, agency relates to events that would not have happened if the agent had acted differently (Giddens, 1984). "To be able to 'act otherwise' means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs." (Giddens, 1984, pp. 14-15). If all events were determined by the grander structures, no individual would be able to influence a process or state of affairs.

Agency is reliant on a level of power to make a difference, specifically one that would not have come about regardless of the individual's action or absence. If the individual no longer has the power to make a meaningful difference, the individual has lost agency.

A deterministic world view would lead to the conclusion that whatever the individual does is predetermined by social conditioning or possibly human biology. Structuration theory puts a strong emphasis on structure in determining social behaviour. Giddens does not reject the influence of structure on individual action but recognises that agency is of greater importance in shaping social reality than structuralism admits. According to Giddens, humans can always act otherwise.

Because of how a social structure is defined – an external force influencing individual behaviour – it is easy to think of structures as constraining individual action. However, Giddens does not see structure and agency as being independent and in conflict with each other, but because they both feed into each other, individuals can draw on structures, thus the structures enable their desired actions.

Functionalism tends to give structure the role of a relatively unchangeable part of social life that exist external to human beings and therefore constrain free and independent thought and action of the individual (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens elaborates on the importance of the self. He argues that individuals, by creating their self-identity, in turn shape the structures of society. Although he recognises that the self is influenced by external sources, they do not determine the self because the self is an active entity (Giddens, 1991).

These thoughts on structure and agency make up the conceptual framework that is used in the analysis. To answer my main research question, I am particularly interested in the

interplay between structure and agency and how their relative importance is imagined by the degrowth movement. Structuration theory is well suited for this task because it acknowledges the importance of both and sees neither as existing independently of the other.

4. Methodological Framework

4.1. Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological assumptions that underlie the research conducted in this thesis. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first section outlines the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which the methods are based. Further, it briefly explains the choice of an interpretive research approach as opposed to the somewhat more common positivist approach to research. The second section includes the choice of field from where data is gathered, and this section explains the method used to gather data. The third and final section discusses the approach taken to make sense of and analyse the data. Following up on the discussion of interpretative versus positivist research approaches, I explain my position towards common research themes, including falsifiability, validity, replicability, objectivity, trustworthiness, reflexivity, and transparency, and show how each of them are dealt with in the thesis.

4.2. Ontological Assumptions

The ontological assumptions made in interpretive methodology are similar to those made by Alexander Wendt about the root of state relations. Similarly, interpretive research has a strong agent-centred point of view. In interpretive research, humans are understood as agents that actively construct the world around them. In contrast to positivist research who see human beings as objects, interpretivist research understands human beings as agents (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). “Such persons are seen as actively and collaboratively constructing (and de-constructing, meaning both critically assessing and changing) their politics, societies, and cultures—along with the institutions, organizations, practices, physical artifacts, and language and concepts that populate these. At the same time, those same political and cultural contexts frame these agents’ possibilities for thought, discourse, and action. Interpretive research understands that the motivation that animates these several activities is meaning—both its expression and its communication to others.” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 46). In other words, the world is not seen as something that merely exists “out there” apart from human experience, but as something that exists and is created by people in their interaction with the world.

4.3. Epistemological Assumptions

In standard positivist epistemological presumptions, the researcher is seen as standing completely outside of that which he is researching, thus not affecting the objects of his research (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). In contrast, interpretative methodology approaches reality as something that is shaped by the researcher's engagement with it. In other words, I recognise that as a researcher I cannot see the world from an external position, but that I am part of the world I am researching. Furthermore, the field I am researching is one where I can expect to encounter multiple understandings of social reality. The conclusions from this research emerge in the specific context where the researched literature is situated, as well as the context in which I interpret reality from my point of view.

4.4. Interpretive Research

I take an interpretivist approach to research, as opposed to the more standard positivist approach. This is both because of my view of the reality, as well as the nature of the research questions this thesis aims to answer for which an interpretive approach is better fit. For reasons of time constraints and lack of feasibility, this research does not attempt to uncover and understand every single structure that makes up the global civilisation. In line with interpretive research standards, this thesis aims to take away context-specific meanings (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 23), in this case, the context being that of the degrowth movement. What is defined as structures, both those that are perceived as constraints and those that can enable change, are defined and made explicit from the degrowth movement, and could be given a different meaning in another context.

4.5. Choice of Setting

With the approach taken in this research I seek to find *an* answer, but not necessarily *the* answer. The degrowth concept is chosen for several reasons. Degrowth vision has some utopian traits. It provides a blueprint for what an ecologically sustainable world could look like. The degrowth concept is a challenge to many aspects of modernity, both directly and indirectly, and therefore comes into conflict with existing structures.

When researching social movements, political parties, or organisations, it is a logical choice to look towards the leaders of the movement to understand their message. The degrowth concept as it exists today is largely an idea more than it is a unified movement. There is no headquarters for the degrowth movement. Some authors have established

themselves as prominent promoters of the degrowth concept and interviewing them would have been a good choice. Nevertheless, the data in this research is collected through a literature study. The data is gathered from three academic journals, namely *Journal of Cleaner Production* (JCP), *Ecological Economics* (EE), and *Ecological Visions* (EV). In 2010, 2012, and 2013 respectively, these three journals each published one special issue dedicated on the topic degrowth.

The special issue in *Journal of Cleaner Production* is titled: “Growth, recession, or Degrowth for Sustainability and Equity?” and contains 15 research articles on the topic. The special issue in *Ecological Economics* is called: “The Economics of Degrowth” and contains thirteen articles. Finally, the special issue in *Environmental Values* is titled: ‘Degrowth or Regrowth?’ contains seven articles. The criteria for selecting these journals is that the articles are peer-reviewed and that they are published in scientific journals. These journals are described more in depth at the end of this chapter.

The choice of researching literature instead of interviewing academics and/or activists (people can be both) is made to access a broader spectrum of voices that address the concept of degrowth compared to what personal interviews would yield. This is done with the hopes of hearing the point of view of promoters and critics alike, thus gaining a more nuanced understanding of the structural constraints that hinder the implementation of the various principles of societal organisation that stem from the degrowth spectre.

Not only do journal articles tell us what the author thinks about a certain topic; articles can also reveal what they leave out, the worldview of the author, and the context in which the author is situated. We see what aspects the authors choose to focus on as well as what is left out. By choosing certain words over others, the author’s frame of reality is presented. The way words are used or omitted in describing ideas or events also tell us something about the writer’s position in relation to the issues that are discussed.

The focus is put on the academic debates surrounding degrowth. The purpose of this research is not an in-depth review of how the idea of degrowth came about or even what goals the degrowth movement aims to achieve. My research focuses on how the degrowth movement imagine their ideas can become reality, and the degrowth movement’s perception of the structures that constrain their ideas from becoming reality. These structural constraints can either be made explicit in writing, or they can be implicit, and can in that case be found by reading between the lines.

The above explains why I chose to research journal articles. Articles relating to degrowth seem to grow in popularity parallel to the growth in economic inequality, financial insecurity, environmental degradation, and a political climate that causes resentment and polarisation among voters. As these issues all appear to have been on the rise during the last decade, I have chosen to focus on articles relating to the topic in the current state of the world in this period. This approach leaves out other articles, documentaries, and books written on the subject. However, I choose this approach to have more structure and predictability, and to avoid cherry-picking the articles that favour my personal point of view and biased interest. This way, some articles that I may have ignored are included.

4.6. Research Questions

In interpretive research designs, a research question serves a somewhat different purpose than in positivist research designs but is still important. Joe Soss (2010, quoted in Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011) writes that the requirement for a rigid research question often leads to testing hypotheses with the goal of confirming or refuting them. He suggests that it is better to remain open to the question changing as we engage with the field, but that this at the same time does not mean we should neglect the formulation of a research question. Bearing this in mind, I have developed an initial research question and a few sub-questions that I intend to answer. Simultaneously, I remained open to my focus changing throughout the research. I predominantly answer this main research question and the subsequent sub-questions:

How is the transformative potential of agency and structure imagined by the degrowth movement?

Sub-Questions

What are the structures in modern Western civilization that inhibit its transition to an ecological utopia as envisioned by the degrowth movement?

What role can *agency* have in approaching a degrowth society?

What kind of perspectives does the degrowth movement take on the interplay between structure and agency?

4.7. Transparency and Validity of Research

Interpretive science and positivist science take remarkably different approaches to trustworthiness of research claims (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). In positivist research, the research design tends to follow a fixed set of standardised rules that are followed through the entire research process. This often includes a hypothesis that is put to the test, and a method of execution that does not change during the process (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). While the standard for assessing research may be appropriate for positivist research, especially testing causality in a laboratory, the standards are not useful in interpretive research that seeks to understand contextualised meaning-making (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012). This is the case because the two approaches seek to uncover different things about reality, but also because they are based on different assumptions about what reality is and what can be known about it (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

The common standards used to assess positivist research are *validity*, *reliability*, *replicability*, *objectivity*, and *falsifiability*. However, these indicators are insufficient to measure trustworthiness in interpretive research, because the standards and the practices that go along with them follows from a different world-view (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). For example, while the standards used in positivist research rests on the assumption that social phenomena are relatively stable and a-historical, interpretive research understands social phenomena to be dynamic and fluid and historically constituted (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). For the positivist measures *reliability* and *replicability* to be useful, research participants and researchers must be assumed interchangeable, but this is not the case for interpretive research. For example, any researcher trying to replicate this research would generate the same findings but would most likely interpret and analyse the findings differently. Furthermore, positivist research is “based on the assumption that the researcher can generate knowledge of the research setting, its actors and their acts, its events, language, objects, etc., *from a point external to it.*” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 95). The assumption that it is possible to ensure objectivity in this way is rejected by interpretive research, but this does not mean interpretive research methods disregard concerns about objectivity. On the contrary, the problem of researcher bias is a serious concern in proper interpretive research design.

Researchers can be biased, and their presence can influence the outcome of research (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Based on the assertion that a perfectly objective stance to

social phenomena is impossible whenever human researchers are involved, interpretive research addresses objectivity differently. One problem is the risk of confirmation bias. Schwartz-Shea & Yanow warns that emotional attachment to the research topic “might be suspected to induce the researcher to select only that evidence that will confirm a prejudice for or against an argument (whether in data collection and/or analysis stages).” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 96). This concern is particularly relevant to address in my research, as I chose to emphasise certain data over others in the analysis stage. Nevertheless, the positivist assumption that research can be conducted without the researchers’ presence affecting what is researched or vice-versa is disputed by interpretive research (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Sense-making of texts or social phenomena including people is nearly impossible without intellectual and sometimes emotional engagement with what is being studied (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). As they put it: “The idea that researchers are incapable of recognizing bias and prejudice is logically inconsistent with the phenomenological and hermeneutic premises that underpin interpretive understandings of science. To presume that humans cannot be aware of their “biases” is to reject human consciousness—the possibility of self-awareness and reflexivity—and human capacity for learning.” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p. 98).

My main step to ensure scientific validity of my research is transparency. By openly showing my personal bias and explaining my choices, I show the reader how these can influence the knowledge claims I present in my analysis.

One of the greatest potential issues with my research approach is confirmation bias, i.e. that I search for preferred answers to my research questions (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). The choice of three journals helps limit this potential issue, as I am forced to read a selected set of texts, and I cannot include other texts that would be in line with the answers I would prefer to find. While randomisation in the data collection process is a common tool to achieve validity, interpretive research does not attempt to select data based on randomization. “Researchers give up such control when they enter research participants’ world; and randomization is impossible because of the limitations on compiling a complete list (the “sampling frame”) of everything that occurs in the field.” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 111).

The concern that researchers due to their bias choose evidence that support their point of view is not an issue that is unique to interpretive research. Schwartz-Shea & Yanow write

that: “deceitful practices know no methodological borders (2012, p. 112). Although researchers cannot avoid and control for all presuppositions, researchers can be aware of their bias, and by exercising reflexivity throughout the process of their sense-making (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). They stress that interpretive researchers are not slaves to: “what they see, hear, or read—they are not *trapped* by what people tell them any more than they are by their prejudices.” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 112). Rather, through the process of reflexivity, researchers pay attention to what they are not observing and what is left out of what they see, hear, or read. Reflexivity also “refers to a researcher’s active consideration of and engagement with the ways in which his own sense-making and the particular circumstances that might have affected it, throughout all phases of the research process, relate to the knowledge claims he ultimately advances in written form.” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 100). Furthermore, “reflexivity includes consideration of how the researcher’s own characteristics matter and, where feasible, assessments of the ways in which his particular scholarly community and even the wider social milieu impact the research endeavour.” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 100). This is something I have attempted throughout my research process, by considering how my personal biases may have affected my research and the conclusions.

4.8. Ethical Concerns

I pay great attention not to misrepresent the opinion of any authors in my analysis. Besides this, my research does not raise many ethical concerns.

4.9. Brief Description of the Scientific Journals

The data for this research is gathered from three scientific journals who each published a special edition dedicated to degrowth.

Ecological Economics is a journal that has a focus on the interplay between ecosystems and the economy. Based on the field of study with the same name, the journal is concerned with how economic activity can be governed to promote human well-being, ecological sustainability, and justice. It is a transdisciplinary journal that accepts articles from multiple academic traditions and with various methodological approaches.

Journal of Cleaner Production shares many similarities with Ecological Economics. It is a transdisciplinary journal with a focus on sustainability. The goal of JCP is to publish

articles that help society become more sustainable. Specifically, it has a focus on minimising the production of waste and finding more efficient ways of using resources.

Environmental Values is an interdisciplinary journal that draws on numerous disciplines. The common feature of the published articles is a focus on the environment in relation to humans and other animals. The journal has a focus on both present and future issues, largely related to the effects of policy.

To summarise, my research is based on an interpretive research design that seeks to understand the meaning of the content in literature about the concept *degrowth*. This implies that the researcher is not considered to exist outside of the social world that is being researched. This has implications for the validity of the research but does not necessarily make the research' description of social reality any less valid than would an approach based on a positivist research design.

5. Analysis of Findings

My analysis of the findings is presented in four separate sections. The four sections address the sub-questions presented in the methods chapter. The first and second section cover the main structural constraints presented by the degrowth movement as they are presented in the researched literature. The structures mentioned in the literature are many and could easily have been divided into five or ten parts but will for simplicity's sake be put in two categories: economic structures, and social structures. Note however, that the two are more intertwined than they are separate, as both play into each other. The literature frequently presents them as two sides of the same coin, with one often shaping and/or being shaped by the other. Some of the literature has a strong focus on legal institutions, but in most cases this focus is presented in direct relation to the economic system or civil society. The third section discusses the second sub-question about the potential role of agency in transforming the structures that support a growth-focused society into a degrowth society. Drawing on the analysis of the first three sections, the final section is a discussion of the third sub-question about the interplay between structure and agency and its implications for degrowth.

I devote space in my analysis to a number of authors, because while most authors point out the environmental and social issues we face and provide a detailed explanation of the source of those issues, the authors I focus on take an extra step to explore various approaches to challenging the predominate system and they show not only that degrowth is necessary, but provide concrete suggestions to be put into practice to achieve the desired transition from a growth-based society to a post-growth society.

The analysis presented below reflects what I deem most relevant to answer my research questions. Another researcher with a different personal and academic background might have allotted more space to what was presented in other articles, which would result in an analysis of different text, resulting in another conclusion.

5.1. Section 1. Economic Structures

The first structural constraint is the one most frequently mentioned across all three journal editions. This constraint is the constraint the degrowth concept attacks most head-on, namely the current organisation of the economic affairs on a private, national, and global level.

The three journal editions chosen for my thesis take slightly different approaches in how they address the degrowth concept, but their focus shares more similarities than differences. According to Serge Latouche (2009) it is not only the economy that is founded on growth, but society (Demaria, 2013). One thing every article author agrees on, whether stated explicitly or implicitly, is that the many problems we face, such as environmental degradation, social discontent, and economic problems, derive from a structural crisis. Speth, who writes from an American point of view, writes: “the prioritization of economic growth and economic values is at the root of the systemic failures and resulting crises that America is now experiencing” (2012, p. 182). In support of this argument, Kallis et al. (2012) write that: “ecological limits, exhaustion of investment outlets in mature economies, the burden of debt and geo-political shift point to a structural crisis (Kallis et al., 2009; Wallerstein, 2010)” (Kallis et al., 2012, p. 1), and they suggest this may be good for the environment, because it means growth has stagnated. However, they add that this can be catastrophic socially, because growth economies do not degrow, but collapse (Kallis et al., 2012, p. 1). “The core question for 21st century economics is no longer how nations get rich, but how they manage without growth” (Kallis et al., 2012, p. 1). They criticise mainstream economics for ignoring this question, because to mainstream economics, a financial crisis like that of 2008 is a necessary function of the system (Kallis et al., 2012). The response of mainstream economics remains the same as during the Great Depression: austerity measures or Keynesian expansion policies. Austerity measures in Southern Europe proved ineffective at achieving the goal of continued economic growth (Kallis et al., 2012), while Keynesian expansion “may not work for mature economies with limited ecological space for growth” (Kallis et al., 2012, p. 1).

Ten years after the financial crisis of 2008, we are better positioned to see the long-term effects of the policies that were implemented by governments to overcome the crisis. In the United States and most of Western Europe, measures were taken to increase economic growth. For example, to encourage consumption, interest rates have been kept at near zero for the last decade in many Western economies. This has made money relatively cheap, and

enabled more people to take on more debt, thus fuelling their private consumption and at the same time GDP. It is precisely the mindset behind these types of economic policies that the degrowth movement takes issue with. To them, the problems resulting from the economic system are not unavoidable, but rather a direct result of a prevailing growth-mindset that has long ago passed the time when it should be a number one concern of governments and civil society. In the articles researched, the economic system is the overarching theme that fuels numerous of the other structural constraints mentioned in the articles. While other structures are mentioned as constraints, they are in most cases a by-product of the economic system. The many aspects of the current economic system are in many articles the main structural constraint that inhibits a transition to an organisation as visualised by the degrowth movement. The economic system is scrutinised from various angles which will be laid out in the following pages.

For many advocates of degrowth, there is no question whether degrowth will become reality in the future. Degrowth is sure to become reality unless technological innovation can keep up with increased needs and desires for consumption of materials and energy. The question is whether degrowth is something that is forced upon us or if we can choose it freely before it comes to that. Hence, there is a difference between unsustainable degrowth, i.e. “degrowth within a growth regime” (economic depression) or “sustainable degrowth, a voluntary, smooth and equitable transition to a regime of lower production and consumption.” (Schneider, Kallis, Martinez-Alier, 2010, p. 511). Schneider et al. emphasise that degrowth can bring about negative conditions if it comes about because of a recession or depression within the growth regime. Such a forced degrowth can lead to increased unemployment and poverty (Schneider et al., 2010). Therefore, they distinguish between sustainable degrowth and unsustainable degrowth. While both scenarios would result in a reduction in GDP, sustainable degrowth would involve a reduced GDP: “because of a reduction in the large-scale, resource-intensive productive and consumptive activities...” (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 512). This is not a cause for worry because the importance of GDP is secondary to “the pursuit of well-being, ecological sustainability and social equity” (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 512). GDP can even fall while at the same time socio-environmental improvements take place (Schneider et al., 2010).

Although many voices in the degrowth movement support the idea of a SSE as outlined by Daly, they emphasise that SSE is only a feasible option after a prolonged period of economic degrowth. Even if we were to achieve SSE this year, our current level of

production and consumption already has us on a path towards certain environmental destruction and a resulting civilizational collapse. Speth elaborates on this point: “all that human societies have to do to destroy the planet’s climate and biota and leave a ruined world to future generations is to keep doing exactly what is being done today, with no growth in the human population or the world economy.” (Speth, 2012, p. 182). Speth asks one of the same questions that resulted in this thesis: “in order to seek something new and better, a good place to begin is to ask why today’s system of political economy is failing so broadly” (Speth, 2012, p. 182). He begins his examination of why the system is failing by writing that key features of the system create a reality that is destructive to the environment (Speth, 2012). Following, he jumps into listing the key features of the political economy that constrain transitioning to a better world. According to Speth, the main problems are:

“An unquestioning society-wide commitment to economic growth at almost any cost; powerful corporate interests whose overriding objective is to grow by generating profit, including profit from avoiding the environmental costs they create and from replicating technologies designed with little regard for the environment; markets that systematically fail to recognize environmental costs unless corrected by the government; government that is subservient to corporate interests and the growth imperative rampant consumerism spurred by an addiction to novelty and by sophisticated advertising economic activity now so large in scale that its impacts alter the fundamental biophysical operations of the planet—all combine to deliver an ever-growing world economy that is undermining the ability of the planet to sustain life.” (Speth, 2012, p. 182). Speth’s focus is on the environmental impact of this system, but as other data in this analysis shows, the impact also directly affects people’s well-being.

Speth points to the increasing lack of democratic governance as a key issue. Although no article in my research argues that democracy is part of the systemic failures, there is disagreement about the capability of the democratic process to solve environmental issues. E.g. Bergh mentioned below who has no faith in voluntary simplicity, or Ophuls who does not think the lack of direct democracy is the issue, but that the issue lies with people’s unwillingness to accept the material austerity that degrowth implies. If Bergh and Ophuls are right, the degrowth movement is up against some huge problems. To illustrate that degrowth is not a universally agreed upon set of ideas, these words by Speth is a good example:

“it is thus up to us as citizens to inject values of fairness, solidarity, and sustainability into this system, and the government is the primary vehicle we have for accomplishing this. But (...) the government is excessively under the thumb of powerful corporations and concentrations of great wealth.” (Speth, 2012, p. 182).

Regardless of whether trying to influence the government and achieving degrowth through stronger democracy is feasible, government’s close ties with the interests of big business, strengthened by a shared interest in growth, is a structural constraint that makes voluntary sustainable degrowth seem not only difficult, but nearly impossible.

5.2. Section 2. Social Structures

The economic structures do not exist independent of people, and vice-versa. The thought that a set of social structures constrain the improvement of welfare, well-being, and happiness, appear central in the arguments made in favour of degrowth. These structures include the psychology of the individual, interpersonal relations, and the individual’s relationship to the market and objects. Following is an analysis of how the researched literature address this issue. The literature explores why economic growth beyond a certain point does not equate increased happiness, but rather the opposite. It also explores how degrowth can increase well-being.

A core argument of the degrowth movement is that the dominant growth-based economic system does not lead to happiness and fulfilment in the individual, but rather the opposite, and that degrowth is an approach that can lead to greater fulfilment. To illustrate, Marcuse (1964) argued that: “man has lost his freedom through industrial capitalism and has become a slave of consumer goods imposed upon him while his ‘real needs’ are not fulfilled.” (Huetting, 2010, p. 526). This can explain some of the rise in depression, alienation, feelings of loneliness, powerlessness, and anxiety felt by individuals in the West.

In their criticism of the growth-based economic system, several articles point to what is called the Easterlin Paradox (Schneider et al., 2010; Kallis et al., 2012). The Easterlin Paradox states that: “growth above a level that satisfies basic needs does not improve psychological wellbeing” (Kallis et al., 2012 p. 1). This helps explain why degrowth activists and academics are particularly focused on affluent Western countries. Many of these countries seem to be at the point where higher incomes do not improve wellbeing.

Bergh (2010) makes the point that many of the environmental, social, and economic problems are a result of an unhealthy obsession with growth – he calls it growth fetishism – and he examines how a shift in focus to well-being can make GDP irrelevant. Included in this argument is that GDP is already irrelevant, because it does not capture trades and services that are not paid for in cash, such as all the voluntary and unpaid work people do for family and community, and because GDP leaves out multiple indicators of well-being and prosperity for a population in any given country. GDP was not developed to measure welfare but is used to judge a country’s economy in relation to other countries and over time (Bergh, 2010). GDP, therefore, is confused with welfare, e.g. it is often used to indicate standard of living (Bergh, 2010). Another aspect that contributes to making GDP an inadequate measure of well-being is that well-being is subjective, but more importantly, one person’s experienced level of happiness can be relative to that of another because of our tendency to compare our status to that of people around us. Bergh illustrates the concept of relative happiness:

“Since status is a very scarce good, increases in relative income come down to a zero-sum game; what one individual gains, others lose – with no sure rise of social welfare. An additional relevant insight of happiness research is that individuals tend to adapt or get used to changed circumstances whether income-related or not. Since people do not realize this adaption, they keep striving for ‘more’ – the result is that while GDP rises welfare remains constant.” (Bergh, 2010, p. 541). Borrowing the *law of diminishing returns* from economics, it appears that one more unit of consumption does not equal a linear growth in satisfaction. Every increase in satisfaction requires more consumption than the consumption that led to the previous increase in satisfaction.

Furthermore, Bergh adds that GDP excludes informal transactions and externalities that lowers well-being, such as noise-, light- and air-pollution, and degradation of the planet’s life support systems. By no means does Bergh claim his observations about GDP and happiness to be new. On the contrary, he calls it a *GDP paradox*: “despite all theoretically and empirically motivated criticism of GDP as a social indicator, its role in economics, public policy, politics and society continues to be influential.” (Bergh, 2010, p. 541). Despite the missing link between GDP and happiness in a population, politicians from nearly all sides of the political spectrum, news media, many economics teachers, and policy makers continue to push for continued GDP growth (Bergh, 2010). Unless this myth can be done away with, it is highly unlikely that a degrowth society will emerge voluntarily. Sharing the point of view of

Ophuls, Bergh writes that the growth obsession will not be discarded unless a disaster occurs, and that economic growth will sadly be curbed not by design but by disaster (Bergh, 2010).

Bergh (2010) suggests collective action in the form of a worldwide ceiling on greenhouse gas emissions or to somehow include environmental externalities in the price of a product to ensure that the environmental harm of production practices is reflected in the price the consumer must pay. However, he does not specify through what channels these solutions can be implemented, nor does he show that people will willingly accept such policies.

To many of the articles used in this research, the obsession with economic growth is the main constraint to achieving environmental protection, increased well-being, and human prosperity. Not only is GDP an insufficient measure of well-being and happiness, but the objective of GDP growth is in direct conflict with policies that could increase well-being.

Bergh gives the example of governments being reluctant to implement policies to protect the environment, because it would come at the cost of potential GDP growth. “Without the unconditional GDP growth objective there will be less resistance against types of policy aimed at improving social welfare with negative consequences for growth or the rate of growth.” (Bergh, 2010, p.542). Bergh does not suggest that individuals should not strive for personal income growth, but that governments should not be concerned with growth. Rather, governments should remain neutral and instead put their effort into policies that are more directly linked with the well-being of the population it is supposed to represent, such as health care and environmental protection (Bergh, 2010). Interestingly, he also argues that degrowth should not be a priority for governments either. This is because being for or against growth does not lead to the best social welfare. Still, degrowth would likely be the outcome of environmental policies (Bergh, 2010). About GDP he writes: “we should be relaxed about it, since the constraint of unconditional GDP growth unnecessarily limits the space in which we search for human betterment.” (Bergh, 2010, p. 542). This is a reasonable conclusion. There are many scenarios where degrowth could be implemented without it leading to an improvement in well-being for people. If governments can shake the idea that growth equals human betterment, they can start pursuing goals that are more likely to improve well-being even if the pursuit of these goals incur some decline in economic growth.

In stark contrast to the voluntary simplicity movement and much of the degrowth literature (including many of the articles read in this research), Bergh sees no value in a voluntary transition based on frugality. The phenomena of “greed, opportunism, status

seeking and rebound” (Bergh, 2010, p. 542) are real and not easily overcome voluntarily by most people. Bergh’s point of view is interesting in trying to understand the structural constraints the degrowth movement faces, and it ties into the wider discussion of this thesis about the structure-agency debate. On the one hand, many politicians and journalists, with their growth-fetishism, eagerly push the growth-agenda and can therefore be viewed as the ones reinforcing the structural constraints of the economic system. On the other hand, people’s greed and status seeking – the reasons for which will be discussed later – may be what gives power to the very politicians and media that most focus on economic growth. In that way, it is people themselves that create and support these structures. Then the question is whether this greed and status-seeking is an inherent part of being human or if we are conditioned to behave in a certain way and to hold certain values over others. I shall return to these questions and elaborate on potential explanations in the fourth section.

The degrowth movement argues that the manufactured consumerism in the West does not meet the deepest human needs (Speth, 2012). In fact, the economic growth of the past few decades has not resulted in increased life satisfaction; on the contrary, distrust and depression has increased (Speth, 2012). In line with the Easterlin Paradox, Speth quotes psychologist David Myers who observed that:

“At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Americans found themselves “with big houses and broken homes, high incomes and low morale, secured rights and diminished civility. We were excelling at making a living but too often failing at making a life. We celebrated our prosperity but yearned for purpose. We cherished our freedoms but longed for connection. In an age of plenty, we were feeling spiritual hunger. These facts of life lead us to a startling conclusion; Our becoming better off materially has not made us better off psychologically.” (Myers, 2004, p. 15, quoted in Speth, 2012).

This echoes Marcuse above and appears to be widely agreed upon in the degrowth movement. If they are right, many people in Western affluent countries should welcome degrowth with open arms. However, this is not happening. In an attempt at explaining the general resistance in the population against reduction in consumption levels, Matthey (2010) references two small-scale experiments that explore people’s feelings about the prospect of reduced consumption.

The first experiment examined how different material aspirations impacted well-being. The second experiment looked at how a focus on material gain affected people’s

preferences. The first experiment showed that if people aspire to high levels of material consumption but then must change their expectations, they encounter a feeling of loss both at the point of lowering expectations, but also when they receive the lower levels of consumption (Matthey, 2010). This was because people's high aspirations continued after new expectations. The second experiment showed that people's reference states regarding what is a desirable level of consumption increases if they: "are exposed to statements that emphasize the importance of material achievements" (Matthey, 2010, p. 567). Matthey concludes that as long as the focus on consumption remains of utmost importance, policies in the direction of degrowth will most likely lead to people feeling a sense of loss in well-being, because their aspirations are not met, hence for as long as people's aspirations are geared towards high levels of material consumption, degrowth policies will be met with resistance (Matthey, 2010).

Matthey applied these conclusions to predict outcomes of the financial crisis of 2008. Matthey wrote: "in the short run, the crisis may lead to a decrease in average consumption levels by causing a worldwide recession." (Matthey, 2010, p. 568). However, such a crisis, she predicted, can potentially lead to the opposite in the long-run, because of increased focus on the economy and the importance of consumption. Increased focus in the media on how the crisis would lead to a loss of wealth and consumption and in turn a decline in well-being, she thought, would serve as a "priming device" and raise people's reference states for consumption, thus decreasing people's well-being at the consumption levels they were experiencing (Matthey, 2010). A second issue she predicted to result from the economic crisis was that: "the pronounced focus of policy makers and the media on economic issues strengthens the public's perception that economic development and consumption are the primary goals to strive for." (Matthey, 2010, p. 568). Not only does this priming make people feel a sense of loss in well-being as consumption drops, but furthermore: "it supports the view that environmental protection is a policy we can only afford to pursue in times of economic flourishing" (Matthey, 2010, p. 568).

The resistance against degrowth then seems to come from unwillingness to not having (sometimes unrealistic) expectations met. We may lack detailed information about the future when we form expectations of our future consumption level, because we lack reliable information on future market conditions, thus perhaps leaving our aspirations incorrect, and so we need to adjust our expectations (Matthey, 2010). "How hard it is for us to accept these changes depends on how fast we adapt to new expectations. If we adapt relatively quickly,

our initial aspirations do not significantly influence the well-being we derive from our outcomes: we do not mind earning and consuming less than we aspired for initially. If, however, we do not adapt quickly to new expectations, our well-being is affected.” (Matthey, 2010, p. 568). This inability, or unwillingness, to adapt quickly to new expectations appears to be one of the main constraints in transitioning from an economy where growth in material consumption is the highest aspiration to an economy where new policy aimed at improving environmental, political, and social conditions at the expense of individual material gain. It is hard to base aspirations on an unknown future, and Matthey adds that social comparison, self-image, and wishful thinking may further make aspirations less rooted in reality.

Contrary to what one might believe, the lower consumption to be expected from the financial crisis of 2008 did not contribute to an improvement for the environment, but rather the opposite because economic losses made politicians more willing to neglect other issues such as environmental protection (Matthey, 2010). Policy makers even sought to ease the crisis by encouraging the population to go shopping (Matthey, 2010).

In a sense, growth versus degrowth is a battle over values. As Bergh shows above, many politicians, corporations, private persons, and parts of the media have a vested interest in maintaining status quo regarding the economic sphere because it allows growth to continue. To them, values of materialism, consumption, displaying status through objects, selfishness and individual success are essential, hence continued economic growth will be protected at any cost. In opposition to these are those who value a clean environment over consumption, physical and mental health over wealth and status, leisure, selflessness and simplicity more than economic growth.

In his paper, Hamilton (2010) explores the appeal of environmentalists/the degrowth movement for citizens in affluent countries to change their consumption behaviour. He finds that this appeal is met with resistance because changing this behaviour for many implies a change in identity. Citizens of affluent countries, he says, increasingly tie their identity to consumption instead of their belonging to work, a class, or a community (Hamilton, 2010). He envisions that: “a new ecological consciousness will depend not so much on a change of beliefs and attitudes but on the emergence of a new sense of self and the relationship of that self to the natural environment.” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 571). The ways Western culture has moved in recent decades, has made an ecological consciousness a more distant reality (Hamilton, 2010). Hamilton also supports the view that such a new ecological consciousness

and a resulting degrowth society can come about in one of two ways in affluent countries. The first way is by environmental shocks, which fits the ‘unsustainable degrowth’ path, or, he hopes, “a widespread change in the process of self-creation induced by a collapse of public confidence in the consumer life” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 571). Following, Hamilton writes:

“The implication is that the task of achieving true sustainability, and especially avoiding climate disruption, is no longer predominately a scientific or technological one, but a cultural and social one.” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 571). This adds to the critiques of the idea of a sustainable future being achievable through technological innovation.

Of all the authors included in this thesis research, Hamilton is the one that engages most directly with the concepts of structure and agency. His point of view reflects Giddens’ structuration theory in that he sees them both influencing each other. Hamilton writes:

“The prevailing situation and the possibilities for a shift to an ecological consciousness depend on both the exercise of agency—the capacity of individuals to make choices and act on them independently—and the influence of structures, especially the ‘soft’ institutions that shape attitudes and orientation to life. In consumer societies more than any others, these institutions often have a hidden or subtle authority; moreover, their objective is to persuade individuals that they are acting autonomously, which confounds the notion of agency. In short, I argue that in modern consumer society most individuals have the opportunity for greater agency but refuse to exercise it.” (Hamilton, 2010. P. 571).

Again, this illustrates that attitudes are a main reason why degrowth is so difficult to implement. This hidden or subtle authority of institutions implies that changing them is challenging, and it is made more so if they are set up to persuade people they act of their own free will if they do not. Although individuals have more potential agency than they choose to exercise, that they refuse to exercise it is a too simplistic explanation. As Hamilton also shows, some structures exist to convince people to hold certain attitudes. Then it follows that people do not refuse to exercise their agency, but that they already believe they are exercising their agency, or in the worst-case scenario they are convinced that they do not possess greater agency.

Furthermore, Hamilton elaborates on the consequences of the structural transformation in Western societies where social change once was driven by production into now being driven by consumption. This change was accompanied by free market ideology getting a stronger footing in areas from which it had previously been excluded, such as social

and cultural life (Hamilton, 2010). “The logic of market expansion for the first time came into concordance with the life goals of individuals, a phenomenon I have elsewhere dubbed ‘growth fetishism’.” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 572). Hamilton writes that the social movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s “were a manifestation of the deeper human longing for self-determination.” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 572).

Hamilton argues that marketers have exploited the human desire for individuality and purpose by offering new products to fill this void, but consumerism’s inability to truly provide meaning has led to “restless dissatisfaction, chronic stress and private despair, feelings that give rise to a rash of psychological disorders – including anxiety, depression and substance abuse [9-11]—and a range of compensatory behaviours including many forms of self-medication.” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 572). He blames this on what advertising has become: “Advertising long ago discarded the practice of selling a product on the merits of its useful features. Modern marketing builds symbolic associations between the product and the psychological states of potential consumers, sometimes targeting known feelings of inadequacy, aspiration or expectation, and sometimes setting out to create a sense of inadequacy in order to remedy it with the product [15]” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 571). This helps explain the reluctance in people to accept degrowth policies and a degrowth lifestyle. When people are made to feel incomplete and told that consumption can fill their gap, they will pursue this if they cannot envision another solution. People are kept in the loop. To illustrate: “The beauty of this approach is that consumers can never get what they want. Products and brands cannot give real meaning to human lives, so consumers lapse instead into a permanent state of unfulfilled desire [18], the existential state of the consumer in modern capitalism.” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 572).

Thus, there is hardly anything “out there” that keeps people tied to the consumerist lifestyle. People do not exercise their agency because they don’t want to. They have been convinced that the current growth-regime is for their benefit, and so they remain voluntary slaves to a system that in many ways do them more harm than good. Hamilton explains that: “This is why there has been so little resistance to globalization; people around the world have been persuaded that economic growth is the path to happiness, and that unfettered markets will maximize growth.” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 572).

Nevertheless, Hamilton (2010) is critical against the idea of “green consumerism”, because although green consumerism does have some merit, it depoliticises environmental

concerns and pushes the responsibility onto the individual. Instead, he writes, the problems should be understood as endemic to the economic and social structures (Hamilton, 2010). He adds: “While advanced as a way of harnessing the power of consumers, green consumerism can be disempowering because it denies agency of citizens instead of consumers.” (Hamilton, 2010. p. 574).

The idea of green consumerism leaves the dominant economic system largely untouched. Although green consumerism implies some changes, the changes are not so radical that they threaten the dominant system. Business as usual and growth can continue, only with slight moderation. But it is questionable if appeals to morality have anything but a limited effect on people’s consumer choices. Hamilton suggests a new strategy:

“Instead of confronting consumers with the facts of environmental decline and thereby hoping, against the evidence, that rationality will prevail over the demands of market-based self-creation, a more powerful approach is to ask them to reflect on whether the aspirational lifestyle actually makes them happy.” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 575). He suggests that people can, and many already do, wilfully pursue a more frugal lifestyle and make it become part of their new identity. But this change will come about not because people want to make moral consumer decisions, but because they wish to be happy.

That the growth-based economic system is not the ideal for happiness is an older idea that was written about long before Daly introduced SSE in his book *Beyond Growth* in the mid-90s. Dobson directs the reader to a paragraph by John Stuart Mill on the idea of a ‘stationary state’ economy about which Mill wrote:

“I am inclined to believe that it would be, on the whole, a very considerable improvement on our present condition. I confess I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other’s heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind, or anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress.” (Mill, 1848: book 4 chapter 6; quoted in Dobson, 2013, p. 244 probably delete).

Understanding the structures that constrain a transition to a degrowth society is merely the first step. To make the transition a reality, it is useful to understand the most effective ways the structural constraints can be overcome. The next section analyses how the degrowth movement perceives of the different transformative powers of structure and agency.

5.3. Section 3. Overcoming Structural Constraints: A Structure-Agency Interplay

Degrowth is not a framework universally agreed upon by everyone who writes about it. As shown throughout my analysis, some believe in bottom-up democratic solutions, while others suggest a more top-down approach is the only viable option to solve environmental problems. Similarly, authors address different approaches to solve the problems of the current system. Concepts such as frugality and moderation are accepted by most authors as necessary tools to achieve degrowth, however, there are those who think this approach will largely amount to nothing.

Alexander (2013) elaborates on what he calls The Voluntary Simplicity Movement (VSM). His definition of VSM is: “a diverse social movement made up of people who are resisting high consumption lifestyles and who are seeking, in various ways, a lower consumption but higher quality of life alternative.” (Alexander, 2013, p. 287).

Unlike those who make the argument that most people are unable and unwilling to change their consumer behaviour, therefore requiring a top-down solution, the premise of the VSM is that: “legal political and economic structures will never reflect a post-growth ethics of macro-economic sufficiency until a post-consumerist ethics of micro-economic sufficiency is embraced and mainstreamed at the cultural level.” (Alexander, 2013, p. 287). If one accepts that politics, business, and law tend to lag behind public opinion (Alexander, 2013) it follows that there is the most to gain by changing public opinion. This logic is simple enough and does not require much scrutiny. However, its usefulness rests on the premise that it is possible to get a critical amount of people to voluntarily adopt a more materially simplistic lifestyle.

Alexander writes that there is already an extensive amount of existing literature on the shortcomings of the economic system. This has also been my impression while conducting this research. The faults of the economic system are what the majority of the articles address. Furthermore, Alexander writes that much is written about suggested structural changes that would make degrowth into a SSE possible. These two points have been addressed in sections 1 and 2 of this chapter. This third section is an analysis of a gap in the literature on what preconditions are necessary for structural change. Alexander writes: “Very little has been written, however, on what role social or cultural evolution may need to play in providing the

necessary *preconditions* for such structural change.” (Alexander, 2013, p. 288). Alexander argues the importance of this by writing that it is unlikely for a degrowth or SSE to emerge in cultures where the majority of people aspire to increase their level of material wealth and consumption. He labels this a cultural obstacle that must be transcended in order for growth economics to be overcome (Alexander, 2013). This is a highly relevant thought to dwell on to help answer my main research question. From his point of view, the structural constraints are not merely economic and political structures that exist “out there”. Structural constraints are also our own thoughts and the behaviour that results from them. Alexander suggests yet another step must be taken to achieve degrowth:

“Even if notions of degrowth or steady-state economics were to gain widespread acceptance within a culture, it seems highly unlikely that a degrowth or steady-state economy would arise voluntarily unless people had some idea of what needed to be done at the personal and community levels to bring about such an economy” (Alexander, 2013, p. 288). I presume that besides persistent attitudes and values related to economic growth, such a lack of knowledge plays an important role in why people do not exercise their agency. Like Alexander puts it: “In other words, it is not enough merely to offer a critique of existing structures of growth; it is equally important to explore the question of *how one ought to live* in opposition to those structures.” (Alexander, 2013, p. 288). Voluntary simplicity and frugality is one such way.

The goal of participants in the VSM is to create an: “alternative conception of ‘the good life’ in opposition to the Western-style consumerist ideal.” (Alexander, 2013, p. 288). This is achieved by redirecting “time and energy away from materialistic sources of satisfaction (e.g. money, assets, possessions, etc.) toward non-materialistic or post consumerist sources of satisfaction (e.g. social relations, community engagement, creative activity, home-based production, self-development, spiritual exploration, relaxation, etc.)” (Alexander, 2013, p. 288). He points out that such a lifestyle implies that one is so well off that one can choose between several levels of consumption, and that this means the VSM is largely located in the affluent West, and he stresses that his analysis is directed at this geographic location. At the same time, as pointed out above, affluence is no longer solely a Western phenomenon. Neither is affluence a pre-requisite for being enticed by the ideas of the VSM. The idea of voluntary simplicity is not novel, nor can its roots be traced particularly to people in the West. Hermits, sages, monks and many artists from all corners of the world are known to have pursued voluntary simplicity as a way to improve their human condition.

I find it interesting to read how different some authors are in what they believe is the solution to overcome the structural constraints, despite them mostly agreeing about the causes of the problems. Particularly, Bergh's opinion is in direct opposition to Alexander's when he writes: "I further do not see value in the idealistic view of voluntary, bottom-up transition to a self-organized de-growth society in which "frugality" plays an important role, as suggested by many de-growth proponents." (Bergh, 2010, p. 542). Contrary to this, Alexander echoes Speth when he writes that: "the Simplicity Movement (or something like it) will almost certainly need to expand, organise, radicalise and politicise, if anything resembling a degrowth or steady-state economy is to emerge in law through democratic processes." (Alexander, 2013, p. 289).

Alexander's focus is on a bottom-up social movement. His focus is on the VSM in relation to the legal structures of society. He does this: "not because it is the only place where a 'politics of simplicity' could emerge, but because it is a site of particular importance. Our consumption decisions do not take place in a vacuum. Rather, they take place within *structures of constraint*, and those structures make some lifestyles decisions easy and others difficult or impossible." (Alexander, 2013, p. 290). Alexander provides two examples of legal structures and their effect on behaviour and displays how changing them would better enable a transition to degrowth and a SSE. These two examples particularly well illustrate how structures prevent a transition to an ecological utopia:

"It is very difficult to escape car culture in absence of good public transport or safe bike lanes and it is very difficult to 'vote with your dollar' in the absence of laws that require adequate product labelling. The point is that if we were to change the structures, different lifestyle options would emerge, and law reform is obviously one very powerful means of changing social, political and economic structures. Politicising voluntary simplicity through law reform, however, might strike some as paradoxical, in the sense that anything mandated by law does not sound very 'voluntary.' The argument being presented, however, is not that simplicity of living should be *imposed* on people, but that simplicity, rather than consumerism, should be systematically privileged, supported and encouraged when making decisions about how to structure society." (Alexander, 2013, p. 290).

From this point of view, the structures determine people's behaviour to some degree. In the cases he mentions, certain laws favour the growth paradigm, and by default discourage a transition to a degrowth society. Alexander argues that: "law can be understood, to a large

extent, as a reflection of social values and assumptions, such that social or cultural evolution tends to induce legal evolution.” (Alexander, 2013, p. 290).

Seeing the two last arguments of Alexander together, he clearly reflects the line of thought in Giddens’ structuration theory. Legal structures influence people’s behaviour, but at the same time, the very legal structures that influence people’s behaviour reflect their values and assumptions, so in a way the legal structure is determined by people. This fits with the idea in structuration theory that both agency and structure feed into each other. Still, it follows from Alexander’s reasoning that change in attitudes is the best way to change structures.

Working within the system to achieve incremental reforms has proved itself a futile practice because the problems are deeply systemic, hence solving all the issues produced by the political economy requires a radical transformation of the system (Speth, 2010). Speth suggests that this transformation has the potential to come about, and one key factor that strengthens it is the increasingly apparent failure of the system to provide well-being and environmental protection, thus stripping away its legitimacy (Speth, 2012). But he adds that declining legitimacy of the political economic system alone is not sufficient. This, he writes, must come: “together with a mounting sense of crisis and loss, both occurring at a time of wise leadership, and accompanied by the articulation of a new American narrative or story and by the appearance across the landscape of new and appropriate models” (Speth, 2012, p.183). In sum, a strong social movement and a new politics is needed to achieve the appropriate transition. Speth writes that the best shape such a new political dynamic can take is: “a fusion of those concerned about environment, social justice, and political democracy into one progressive force.” (Speth, 2012, p. 183).

In one chapter, Speth writes about envisioning a new order and he suggests how to approach it. According to Speth, the story believed in by Americans goes as follows:

“GDP growth is an unalloyed good. Government regulation and other interference in the economy must meet the test of economic benefit. America is a land of economic opportunity and consumer sovereignty. The poor are poor because they deserve to be. We are well on our way to solving our environmental problems. It is acceptable to deny the validity of the best science if that science challenges religious views or political preferences. America is the most democratic nation on earth, and also the most generous, with the best health care.” (Speth, 2012, p. 185).

It is easy to see how such a narrative can be part of the problem. Speth argues that creating a new narrative for American society is a necessary step in approaching a degrowth society, and the same idea would be relevant in other Western growth-based economies because many aspects of the present American story are similarly part of the narrative in these countries. The narrative pushed in any society creates and recreates economic and political structures, and it is difficult to change because it runs so deep in the human psyche. Changing worldviews and aspirations is a core tool of the degrowth movement to achieve its goals. Demaria writes the following about the eco-villages and Transition Towns movement which illustrates what this change can look like in practice:

“Some actors working on the development of alternatives argue that the change of individual values and behaviour should be the main target of degrowth. This is manifest in the lifestyles of people who practice voluntary simplicity, living better with less, downshifting and slowing down life’s pace. Much attention is given to how conscious critical consumption can promote transformation at both the individual and the social level. The major idea being if less time is spent on formal work and consumption, more time can be dedicated to other activities which are fundamental to one’s well-being, such as social relations, political participation, physical exercise, spirituality and contemplation. Such a shift will potentially be less environmentally harmful.” (Demaria, 2013, p. 202).

Seeing the great emphasis many degrowth writers put on changing individual values and behaviour, I conclude that achieving the goals of the degrowth movement involves a significant level of social engineering. Following Popper’s distinction between two types of social engineering, oppositional activism falls under the first: *piecemeal engineering*. This is because activism with the intent of opposing something seeks out the greatest evils of society and combats those. On the other hand, the degrowth approaches that focus on building alternatives fit with Popper’s idea of *utopian engineering*. This comparison is not completely just, because Popper mainly talked about the organisation of politics, but it nevertheless shows an interesting distinction between various approaches to a degrowth society.

5.4. Section 4. Discussion on the Role of Agency in Transforming Structures

The question of what determines human behaviour: the relative influence of structure or agency, is of importance when imagining a bottom-up approach to change structures. To achieve it, the weight of agency must be relatively large. Recent developments may have given more strength to the structures that constrain a transition away from the growth paradigm, thus minimizing the importance of agency (Alexander, 2013). “The age of globalisation is upon us, and it could be that any attempt to realise a degrowth or steady-state economy will face forms of resistance today that may not have been faced as recently as fifty years ago.” (Alexander, 2013, p. 301). This age of globalisation, he argues, is increasingly making a top-down transition impossible:

“We could call this the problem of ‘Empire’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Not only are nation-states today constrained by numerous international trade agreements and influenced by powerful global institutions, but the free flow of capital around the globe has given new power to transnational corporations which can now move their financial resources from country to country with unprecedented ease (Stiglitz, 2002). A strong case can be made that this has led to economic forces becoming more autonomous from political controls, and consequently that political sovereignty has declined (Sassen, 1996).” (Alexander, 2013, p. 301).

This does not mean that sovereignty has declined, but rather changed from remaining at the national level to the global level, into the form of ‘Empire’ (Alexander, 2013). This new globalised form of sovereignty “can be understood as a decentralising and deterritorialising apparatus of power that is ‘composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule (Hardt and Negri, 2000: xii)” (Alexander, 2013, p.301). This logic is the logic of profit maximisation (Alexander, 2013). It is easy to imagine how the spread of the logic of profit maximisation can make it harder for those who wish to pursue a different lifestyle based on different values. It is also easy to imagine that the larger the institutions that push the growth-agenda become, individual’s capacity to act on their freely made choices diminishes. Drawing on Victor (2009: 221-2), Alexander asks the question: “Could it be that the materialisation of ‘Empire’ means that it would be impossible for one nation-state to transition to a degrowth or steady-state economy

without either violating international trade agreements or inducing, almost instantaneously, the mass exodus of capital?" (Alexander, 2013, p. 302).

This is a good question because the growth of 'Empire' brings to life structural constraints of a new magnitude. While the expansion of the logic of 'Empire' is reaching wider than ever, this globalisation agenda has met increased resistance the past few years, particularly with the United Kingdom deciding to leave the European Union, as well as the latest presidential election in the United States. While these events were certainly not the result of concerns about the environment, they show that countries are still able to make autonomous decisions that are counter to the profit maximisation of this 'Empire'. This may seem like a weak conclusion as both US and the UK are among the ten largest economies in the world. However, the smaller country Bhutan famously moved away from the pursuit of GDP as recently as in 1972, when it declared Gross National Happiness (GNH) to be more important than GDP (Ura, Alkire Zangmo & Wangdi, 2012). In this example, the country does not pursue degrowth as a goal, but uses the GNH index to determine policy-making. This goes right along the thoughts of Bergh above who wrote governments should be less concerned with maximising GDP and more concerned with implementing policy that increases well-being.

This is not intended to disprove Alexander's point. To put things in perspective, Bhutan is a country with less than one million inhabitants. Alexander's argumentation is strong about the nation-state slowly being emasculated by 'Empire' such that a top down structural transformation is becoming less likely (Alexander, 2013), but he offers a response when he writes: "What could defy the profit-maximising logic of Empire more fundamentally than a large, oppositional social movement based on the living strategy of voluntary simplicity? What could challenge the rule of capital more directly than thousands upon millions of people militantly embracing, yet at the same time celebrating, the tantalising paradox that less is more?" (Alexander, 2013, p. 302).

It is tough to conclude whether the degrowth movement can be successful in achieving its desired transition. Much of the literature in this research is hopeful and envisions great potential power in individual agency to changing structures. At the same time, many of the writers are at best sceptical and in a few cases pessimistic to the point where they are certain that political, legal, economic, and social structures will not be adequately

transformed in time and what is left after the collapse of our civilisation will not be something on which a steady-state economy can be built.

6. Conclusion

Based on the recognition of the seriousness of a multitude of interconnected global issues that threaten the life support systems of humankind, this thesis set out to investigate the alternative solutions to these issues that are presented by the degrowth movement. To gain an understanding of these solutions and of the structures that constrain them, 34 articles from three scientific journals on degrowth were analysed. This was done using a structure-agency framework, structuration theory, in order to understand how the degrowth movement imagines the transformative power of structure and agency in its approach to a degrowth society.

In my analysis I have uncovered what I believe to be some of the main structures that inhibit the transition to a degrowth society as a precursor for a steady state economy to emerge in what now makes up Western civilisation. While these structures are many, often highly interconnected, and varying in size and influence, I have grouped them into *economic structures* and *social structures*.

The idea that economic growth and increased material consumption is the best mean to achieve happiness and well-being pushes other crucial concerns aside. Politicians of all sides of the political spectrum continuously emphasise the importance of growth. This obsession with growth, based on a false premise, leads to negligence of government policy and individual behaviour that is necessary to solve environmental problems and social problems whose solutions would come at the expense of economic growth.

From my analysis, I conclude that social structures play an important role alongside economic structures. The same belief as mentioned above is persistent in individuals as well. People are also concerned with increasing their social status relative to others because this is often assumed to be a way to increase well-being and happiness. Simultaneously, modern culture has a strong focus on the attainment of one's desires, particularly those relating to pleasure, as being synonymous with happiness. The degrowth movement sees this as a social structure that hinders the emergence of other values that they argue are equally important if not more wholesome for people to pursue. These values include spending more time with family and friends, increasing connection to a community, pursuing hobbies, spending time in nature, and developing a richer spiritual life. If the myth that economic growth and consumption equals happiness can be done away with, degrowth values may find more acceptance among citizens and politicians alike.

My research shows that there is disagreement among those who write about degrowth regarding their opinion on the transformative power of agency. This mainly revolves around the question of how much people truly have the power to make individual choices that will affect the wider economic structures. For example, one argument presented is that frugality and voluntary simplicity enacted by individuals is incapable of bringing about the changes that are needed for a degrowth society to emerge. The writers that hold this view are in favour of a top-down approach. However, this would also involve some level of agency from at least one person on the top. Current structures, like the economic system, are incapable of voluntarily creating degrowth, because they depend on continued economic growth for their survival.

From the opposing view, individuals are somewhat constrained by structures and must operate within a system, but they nevertheless maintain a level of agency. With this they stand free to make choices that challenge the *status quo* and thus have power to change structures. This is in line with Giddens's structuration theory which acknowledges a similar power of the individual.

The literature researched in this thesis presents no convincing scenario where the move to a degrowth society will be introduced top-down or from within the growth-regime. Most political elites in Western countries appear highly embedded with big business and the pursuit of economic growth and capital gain. Environmental issues and other concerns regarding citizens' well-being seem likely to remain secondary issues from this hold. Therefore, I conclude that if there is any hope for a degrowth society to emerge voluntarily while there is still time, it will most likely have to be introduced by a bottom-up effort by individuals who come together and form social movements.

Though this thesis looked at how the degrowth movement imagines the power of structure and agency in transforming society, it did not seek to make judgement about the approaches of the degrowth movement. It was beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the effectiveness of the various approaches to reach a degrowth society. But drawing on Bergh in the analysis, more research is needed on how to curb the growth-obsession. Oppositional activism, building alternatives, and reformism from within the system are all approaches that have some merit to them, but it can be useful to research which approach has the best track record in achieving change.

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8. Appendices

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