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Discourses on degrowth in Norway: An analysis of political, environmental, and academic interpretations of degrowth

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Master of Science – International Environmental Studies

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Declaration

I, Ylva Ullahammer Bordsenius, declare that this thesis is a result of my research 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.

Signature:



Date 15.02.2024

"And because no one asks us to consider what we really want with our lives and our society, everything is organised for what is, and development rolls blindly on towards a future that no one has taken a stand on."

(Dammann, 1979, 12, translated)

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Thank you to my inspirational supervisor Tor Benjaminsen, and Emil Røyrvik for providing advice during the process.

To be able to write about something as interesting and important as degrowth is a big privilege. I am thankful for writing my master's on this topic as I find it intellectually and emotionally appealing. It is also a topic that overall has been, and still is, societally neglected, in which I do feel a certain responsibility for handling with care. Interestingly, writing one's master's thesis on degrowth in Norway has felt a bit like 'throwing rocks in a glass house'. Precisely this might be why it is so important.

As radical often is a term used to describe degrowth, it is of significance to remember what the word means. Etymologically, radical means going down to the root. As degrowth focus our attention to root causes, seeking to re-address many postulated truths on everything from the human nature to 'the good life', then yes, degrowth is radical. But in terms of being unthinkable, I don't think so.

I would like to thank my wonderful parents for having equipped me with a Pippi Langstrømpe attitude towards life, and especially to my mother for encouraging me to ask why.

Losing my father early, I came to be confronted with limits young. With time, coming to terms with limits have granted me a gratitude over all that is, an overall presence and responsibility of my own agency. Similarly to the saying that there is a lot of strength in vulnerability, I am convinced there is a lot of freedom in the recognition of limits.

I would also like to express gratitude for all the love in my life. Thank you to all my beautiful bad-ass friends!

Abstract

Using a political ecology lens, this master thesis investigates prevalent discourses of degrowth in the contemporary Norwegian context. It creates an overview of how various actors see degrowth in Norway, their characteristics, framing and interpretation of degrowth as well as associated actors behind these discourses. Methodologically, the analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with different actors (political representatives, the environmental movement, and academics engaged on issues of degrowth and related issues) complemented by an analysis of academic articles, debates, and media coverages. The study looked specifically at Norway, as the country is in a unique position economically and geopolitically.

I take a critical realist standpoint in assessing the discourses of degrowth and ecomodernism. The ecomodernist discourse is characterised by the myth of sustainable development enforcing green growth poses a challenge to advocates of degrowth as it is deeply entrenched in the overall Norwegian sociocultural context. Societal actors refrain from addressing the degrowth discourse as they fear to lose social legitimacy, even when they believe and deem the discourses necessary and fruitful. This impacts the overall level of critique in societal debates. A consequence of these re-enforcing social dynamics is that the reigning discourse of ecomodernism remain the socially perceived inhibitor of legitimacy.

Keywords

Degrowth, political ecology, ecomodernism, socio-ecologic transformation, Norway

“Questioning growth is deemed to be the act of lunatics, idealists and revolutionaries. But question it we must.” (Jackson, 2017, 21)

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Discourses on degrowth in Norway: An analysis of political, environmental, and academic interpretations of degrowth

1. Introduction

The IPCC's newest report from 2023 addresses the need to surpass and overcome incremental changes and reach transformational adaptation (IPCC, 2023, 61), clearly stating that current mitigation, adaptation actions and policies are insufficient (IPCC, 2023, 57). By continuing with *business as usual* and the omnipresent unilinear development path whereof economic growth plays the central parameter of success, it is unlikely that we will succeed in meeting the temperature target of 2 degrees (Arent et al, 2014, 22: IPCC, 2023). As the COP28 was about to take place in Dubai last year, 200 Norwegian scientists signed an open letter to the current Norwegian prime minister from the Labour party, Jonas Gahr Støre, stating that: "Research shows that a green transition starts with the ability to imagine an alternative, and then initiate the change processes. Norway has a unique opportunity to show that we are brave enough to act and to lead the green transition that the world is going through." (Ertesvåg, 2023, translated) Their message was clear to change our imaginaries is a key ingredient in making substantial societal changes.

Regardless of the warnings arising out of the planetary boundaries' framework from the Stockholm Resilience Centre, who state that 6 out of 9 planetary boundaries are drastically being overshoot (Richardson et al. 2023), last year's headline of Norway's energy commission was "More of everything. And faster" (NOU, 2023:3). We are facing critical times demanding critical thinking, where addressing the limits of economic growth, cultural values, and our self-justified ways of living with and of the world are becoming a more pressing issue than ever, leaving us no choice but to face them. With an increasing number of predicaments that we face as humans entangled within various co-dependent and intertwined ecosystems, "We desperately need a culture of limits." (Kallis, 2019, 3)

To paraphrase an important thinker in a Norwegian context, we need to accept that we don't have all the answers: beginning by re-establishing a vision (Dammann, 2014). Degrowth does that by not being simply one alternative, but on the contrary encouraging a matrix of alternatives and plural imaginaries, surpassing economic totalitarianism (Damaria, Latouche, 2019, 149) by

stating that perpetual growth is socially unjust and ecologically unsustainable (D'Alisa et al. 2015). As discourses on degrowth remains little discussed in Norway, my objective with this research project is to disseminate the discourses on degrowth at play in the Norwegian context, contrasting them to more traditional discourses surrounding technology centred (green) growth. Through a critical discourse analysis in political ecology, I seek to investigate views on degrowth among politicians, academics and environmental groups, how these vary and what the potentials and barriers might be for degrowth in this specific sociocultural landscape.

Knowledge gap and choice of study

Even though the literature on degrowth has grown significantly with a five-fold increase since 2014 (Fitzpatrick et al, 2022), limited academic work has been done on the topic of degrowth in Norway specifically. One master thesis at the University in Oslo analysed the discourse movement and internal debates within degrowth internationally (Wrigley, 2020), another the need of degrowth in the agricultural sector (Fuglestad, 2023), and there has been a linguistic analysis of the usage of the terms *degrowth* and *green growth* in certain newspapers (Capasso, 2021). However, a study that maps the different interest groups in Scandinavia's discourses on degrowth is lacking.

Other relevant Scandinavian theses on the topic are two master's theses conducted in 2019 on degrowth: firstly, one at Copenhagen Business School, *Degrowth Strategies in a Growth World An Investigation of Degrowth Elements in Organizations of Contemporary Capitalism* (Heil & Jorde, 2019) investigating not-for-profit organisations based on degrowth principles. Secondly, a mapping of visionaries in Swedish party politics (Andersson, 2019) that specifically did a political mapping of the various political parties, finding a lack of discourse on degrowth. It is important to note that the researcher of the latter remarked the need for other Northern countries to study degrowth in relation to political and sustainability areas. Additionally, the internal analysis of the degrowth movement (Wrigley, 2020, 122) addressed the need to study the reception and interpretation of the degrowth discourse. This thesis will contribute to this established knowledge gap and investigate how cross-sectional interpretations of the degrowth discourse plays out in the Norwegian context.

Research questions

1. What are the current stances of different political parties in Norway towards/on degrowth?
2. How do views on degrowth differ between political, environmental, and selected academic actors in Norway?
3. What potentials and barriers for degrowth are identified by environmental and academic actors in the Norwegian context?

Overview and scope of study

Having introduced the topic and context of this study, Chapter 2 will give an overview over the field of political ecology, its discussion on limits, the discourses of degrowth and ecomodernism, followed by discussions on interviews with different societal actor groups, this project explores the different ways in which the public assess, interpret and understand degrowth. I chose to focus this research project on discourses on degrowth within and across representatives of various societal interests, rather than covering all related growth discourses in depth (e.g. green growth etc.), while naturally touching upon informants' overall perception on the necessity of economic growth. Due to the limited scope of a 30 ECTS-thesis, I am unable to paint a picture of how degrowth could *look like* in a Norwegian context, but what I will do is contribute to filling a present knowledge gap in what the different Norwegian discourses of degrowth are like across various groups, including political representatives from 6 out of 9 parties, 4 representatives from some of the leading environmental groups, and 6 academics from various disciplines that share an inclination to degrowth. This had to be so, as I wanted to speak with experts from different backgrounds with knowledgeable insights on it. The benefits and limitations of this will be explored in the method chapter.

2. Theoretical Background

This chapter is the theoretical background for my research and framework for my later discourse analysis. I begin by introducing political ecology, how discourses can be used for interpretation and studies, and then give a brief introduction to the debate in political ecology on limits as that is central in the scope of this thesis. From there, I move to phronetic research which seeks to illuminate the importance of value-rationality in social science and then, pluralism in thinking, to

critically address outdated orthodoxies and recognise their presence. Then, I will also touch upon the prevalence of degrowth related research, to demonstrate how it is spreading.

Political ecology

Defined in the Encyclopaedia of anthropology, political ecology emerges as a critical research field scrutinizing the how and the why economic structures exacerbate and drive environmental change in an increasingly interconnected world (Roberts, 2020). Practitioners of political ecology recognise the intricate interconnection of human societies and nature, and approach them as inseparable (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2017, 14). Many practicing political ecology are inspired by Michael Foucault that brought attention to the importance of studying how discourses through sociocultural dynamics establishes certain truths regarding environment and development which have grave implications for political actions (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2019). The intricate causalities of environmental justice, social inequality and resource distribution are central in degrowth, as in a political ecology.

Philosopher Arne Næss posited a maxim of ecology, saying that “Ecology’s ‘everything hangs together’-maxim” (Næss, 2021, 32). This is a compelling illustration of what political ecology also is: a critical alternative to traditional ways of studying environmental questions, also focusing on power relations and critically addressing claims about the environment and development that otherwise are taken for granted (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2019, 16). In political ecology it is normal to combine multiple geographical levels of scale in analysis, ranging from the local, national and global, and often combining the social and the natural sciences (Ibid, 47) for these to be able to complement each other

Critical realism is an important notion in my methodology for this thesis, as I assess different discourses around how various actor groups interpret degrowth, reflecting ongoing discourses in the society at large. Critical realism is a common tool to exercise in political ecology. Where realism assumes that there is one reality independent of people's own thoughts, perceptions, and judgments about this reality, *social constructivism* assumes that as everyone have their own perceptions and phenomenological experiences of reality, that there is no such thing as one shared reality (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2019). Critical realism combines the above and recognise that there are several versions of truth through different perceived realities: different constructions and conceptions of the phenomena being studied - and these various claims to the

perceptions of reality become objects for empirical investigations (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2019, 25).

Discourses

Discourses are ways of presenting a topic shared by several people, while narratives are stories about specific cases (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2019, 25). As narrative analysis is an approach that emphasises qualitative data about the stories that people employ to account for events (Bryman, 2016, 584), a discourse is “a socially shared perspective on a topic” (Svarstad, Benjaminsen, Overå, 2018, 356). Emphasising the importance of discourses and narratives, anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously stated that ‘Man is an animal suspended in webs of meaning that he himself has spun’. To render discourses can give somewhat simplified pictures of reality, but putting words to them is what makes interpretation possible, for political ecologists to contribute with constructive thoughts critically addressing taken-for-granted premises and parameters (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2017, 88).

“Discourses may be more or less hegemonic, thereby constituting the “taken-for-grantedness” of ways of thinking and doing in a society, but often two or more discourses are drawn upon in discussions and decision-making”
(Svarstad, Benjaminsen, Overå, 2018, 359).

A discourse can be said to be a socially established way of conceiving a phenomenon, often implying more people sharing a certain way of perceiving something (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2017, 50), functioning like a lens in which you assess your moral judgements, colouring and characterising our sets of values. Discourse analysis can study how language shapes the world around us and how some discourses are more dominant than others (Bryman, 2016, 531). In critical discourse analysis especially, one is interested in power and language and why some discourses are more prominent than others (Bryman, 2016, 540).

Debates within political ecology on limits

To better understand the ongoing debates in political ecology related to degrowth, but also some of the frictions in the overall topic of how we approach limits, there is a rift dividing thinkers within political ecology with those sceptical of scarcity on one side, and those on the other which are committed to planetary boundaries (Benjaminsen, 2021). Erik Gómez-Baggethun and Paul Robbins have debated on the realm of political ecology around the controversial topics of limits.

Degrowth advocate Gómez-Baggethun argues that political ecology should take limits more seriously as a physical reality and a rationale for political transformation to overcome what he refers to as political ecology's *political correctness* (Gómez-Baggethun, 2021).

Gómez-Baggethun address that considering limits as social constructs in which are technological surmountable, rather than actual physical obstacles, we undermine biophysical realities, and close into a post-truth scene (Gómez-Baggethun, 2019). He argues that this is not only politically risky; as the idea of limits being a social construct in the last instance entails a reduction of virtues of modesty and restraints to being private matters of individual lifestyle choices; but it also a-politicises political ecology. "If 'ecology' in political ecology is to mean something more than a broad term for 'environment', political economists and environmental scientists must work more closely together to understand the intersections between growth, limits, scarcity, and justice." (Gómez-Baggethun, 2021, 2)

Robbins, an ecomodernist, argues on the other hand that "'degrowth advocates' focus on reducing the size of the economy, combined with their distrust in modern technology, may work against solving global problems of poverty and economic inequality" (Benjaminsen, 2021, 1) These arguments have been opposed by degrowth-author and economist Giorgos Kallis which argues that technological optimism isn't what is the matter per se, but rather the fact that we act like there are no forms of limits. According to Kallis as representing the degrowth movement,

"To stop climate change we need to limit some production/consumption, manage economic slowdowns, *and* apply new technologies - from clean energy, to removing carbon to stabilizing icebergs. Moreover, we also need to live, consume, and produce *differently*— with new limits and new possibilities. Ecomodernism's staunch refusal of limits is wrong and outdated. And there is nothing socialist in it." (Kallis, 2021, 2)

Degrowth and political ecology

Susan Paulson notes that political ecologists, opposed to certain isms' and 'ists' align with degrowth advocates an aspiration to explore pluralities of knowledges, alternative visions and particularly those of non-dominant groups (Paulson, 2015, 45). The self-referential idea of development, 'development for the sake of development' (Hylland Eriksen, 2013) as something unilinear and inherently progressive bears similarities with that of Western societies legitimation of *growth for the sake of growth* (Kallis, 2019: Hamilton, 2003) which both narratives rests on what is not-to-be-questioned. Visually these could be illustrated with an arrow from the worse to

the better. Rather than being a premise, these assumptions and beliefs are questioned both within degrowth and political ecology.

“Both degrowth and political ecology challenge dominant interpretations of the causes of environmental problems. Both contest the prevalent technocratic and economic responses. Both are critical of sustainable development, and the promotion of commodification in its name, and both motivate political and practical action toward more equitable distribution of economic and ecological resources and risk.” (Paulson, 48, 2015)

Notably, just like anthropologists cannot simply confirm to the terminology of development, as it carries with it some evolutionist premises implying societies ‘stages’ into hierarchies (Hylland Eriksen, 2013), degrowth thinkers seek to decolonise "an imaginary dominated by a one-way future consisting only of growth" (D’Alisa et al, 2015, 5). Or as summarised by Jason Hickel; a fundamental problem of our dominant culture is that it has been founded upon acts separation, man to nature and culture to nature, and to overcome that deep-seated dichotomy; “It requires decolonising not only lands and forests and peoples, but decolonising our minds” (Hickel, 2022a, 255)

Multiple social theories on power can be a strength to political ecology as it serves to be complementary and nuance-filling. *Actor-oriented* perspectives are important because they can illuminate exercises of power by corporations, firms, etc., but seen in isolation outside of the context of discursive and economic structures they have the potential of leading to alienating actors from structures, implying a deterministic view of structures operating outside of the individuals (Svarstad, Benjaminsen, Overå, 2018, 359). Neo-Marxist power perspectives are of importance because they involve an understanding of how fluctuating economic structures present themselves as accumulation-possibilities for some, while marginalising others, meanwhile uncovering discursive power by elites are elementary for constructive assessments of the prevailing narratives of the public opinion: “The construction of discourses and associated narratives are activities that influence ways of thinking, public opinion, and thereby decision-making.” (Svarstad, Benjaminsen, Overå, 2018, 359)

Phronetic research and value-rationality

Addressing normative questions like: Where are we going? Is it desirable? What should be done? are oftentimes deemed unscientific by social scientists in their aim to be as scientifically objective, valid and as replicable as possible (Flyvbjerg, 2019) – this often leads to social

science leaving value-laden assessments behind and unriddled with. That the social sciences actively steer away from making normative judgements about the dynamics at play in our world, could in the last instance lead to, as posed in *Towards a society of degrowth*, Instead of pro-actively making and partaking in collective decisions on how we desire to shape the world, we simply adapt re-actively to the technical system and its self-referential logic (Romano, 2021, 23) There is a potent danger in this, as institutions, norms and value-assessments may continue to simply go on, like a perpetuation of *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1996) being a maintenance of certain social structures or cultural schemes that people tend to take for granted.

To overcome this crux, Professor Bent Flyvbjerg argues for the importance of *phronetic* research to overcome social scientific stagnation that is often perceived as filled with dead-ends, either being too contextual or too relativistic in it's reluctance of making value-rational claims. Put differently, he argues that social sciences must restrain its vain attempts to emulate natural science, and rather focus on making a social science that deals with public deliberation and praxis (Flyvbjerg, 2019, 129). Flyvbjerg recognises that our socio-historical foundations are the biggest we have, and argues that they may be fully adequate for our work as social scientists (Ibid, 130), along the lines of what political ecologists practicing a critical realism stance. To quote philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" (Ibid, 137) The narratives and discourses that compose our realities are therefore important to understand. Embracing a multidisciplinary and holistic approach like that of critical realism in political ecology is a fruitful way to investigate the stories and discourses we find ourselves partake in, that is through applying phronetic research.

Pluralism in thinking, overcoming orthodoxies and cultural hegemony

To illustrate how important ongoing economic discourses are for how we organise societies, and the ongoing debates related to the discourses of degrowth and ecomodernism in relation to mainstream economy, I will give a brief overview. As mainstream economy is called *orthodox* theory, alternative economic theories are referred to as *heterodox*. According to George Orwell' famous dystopia '1984', "Orthodoxy means the absence of thinking – not needing to think. Orthodoxy means unconsciousness." (Eliassen, 2016, 100) Within the school of economics in Norway, it is a recognised problem that students aren't being equipped with critical thinking nor alternative models and ways of assessing value (Lindman, 2018: Storli, 2020: Eliassen 2016).

These problems and tendencies within the school of economics, being characterised of solely one way of thinking is a good example of when an ideology becomes normalised to such an extent that it is difficult or even impossible to reflect on it (Hickel, 2022a, 197). This has been posed by famous political philosopher Antonio Gramsci as 'cultural hegemony'. The international organisation Rethinking Economics raises awareness and attention the importance of broadening the horizons of the economic theories being taught in various institutions to ensure heterodox ways of thinking rather than the continuous perpetuation of orthodox classical and neo-classical theories of mainstream economic thought leading to marketisation (Rethinking Economics, 2023)

Discourses at play

From here, I will introduce degrowth, it's historical becoming and some of the various topics it addresses. Furthermore, I will clarify the difference between de- and postgrowth, illuminate some of their presented policies and move on to decoupling. In the latter part, I make clarifications and give examples, for then to comment on the scientific community's' response to the empirical findings.

Degrowth

Degrowth is both a concept and a social movement (Martínez-Allier, 2012, 60) and is a term increasingly being used to mobilise academics and activists to critique the hegemony of economic growth as being inherently good and necessary (Hickel, 2020: Kallis, 2019: Parrique 2019). Degrowth serves "a proposal for a radical reorganisation of society that leads to a drastic reduction in the use of energy and resources and that is deemed necessary, desirable, and possible." (Schmelzer, Vetter, Vasantjan, 2022, 3) Degrowth has a close relationship with the economical tradition of ecological economics, that "challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialised countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being" (Demaria et al, 2013). Economically speaking, thinkers within degrowth address and recognise the need to *re-embed* the economy as posed by economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi (2001) within the social and natural realities of the living world (Kohtari et al, 2019) through

democratic deliberation facilitating for everyone's basic needs and way of fulfilling them in fair, sustainable and convivial ways (Liegey & Nelson, 152, 2020). Degrowth advocates for an economy and culture that recognises that our planet has finite resources and facilitates accordingly - for not only living, but thriving (Hickel, 2021: Jackson, 2017: Schmelzer, Vetter, Nasintjan, 2022).

“Degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being.” (Hickel, 2020a)

The movement suggest and argues for “an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances environmental conditions” (Kallis, 2018, 10) Importantly, degrowth does not aim to be any form of totalising ideology (Wrigley, 2020, 120), on the contrary it can in be considered an umbrella term by embracing various proposals for future society goals (Schmelzer, Vetter, Vansintjan, 2022, 191: Kohtari et al. 2019: Kallis, Demaria, D’Alisa, 2015), utilising critical thinking and value-rationality, as earlier shown with phronetic research, to address where we are and where we deem it desirable to develop as humans and societies. Degrowth calls for the decolonisation of public debate from the idiom of economics, expressing a desired direction for societies to use less natural resources and steer in the directions of concept revolving sharing, conviviality, care and the commons (D’Alisa, Demaria, Kallis, 2015). This is a central point, as degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource use, with the incentive to re-establish a balance with the living world within planetary boundaries, also tackling social inequalities and human well-being (Hickel, 2021)

Degrowth’s becoming

The beginning of the degrowth-movement is typically placed after the Limits to growth-report (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, Behrens, 1972) produced by the Club of Rome in the beginning of the 70s (Jackson, 2017). The degrowth movement was inspired by thinkers like Ivan Illich, Cornelius Castoriadis, Andre Gorz, Serge Latouche and Georgescu-Roegen (Muraca, 2013) which intention wasn’t necessarily replacing the current system with another specific one, but rather criticising the idea of a society that simply reproduces itself independent of people's needs, wishes and desires. In 1992 discussions on ecological and social limits arose because of the term ‘sustainable development’ that ignited among others Latouche, as he assessed this to be an oxymoron, being a contradiction in terms (Muraca, 2013, 149). Latouche established the

French *décroissance* movement in 2008, and ignited other central European countries like Italy, Spain, and Portugal along, with the first international degrowth conference taking place in Paris in 2008 (Muraca, 2013, 150)

“Man can create a society in which he can live indefinitely on earth if he imposes limits on himself and his production of material goods to achieve a state of global equilibrium with population and production in carefully selected balance.” (Club of Rome, 2023, emphasised)

(Figure 1: The typical symbol of degrowth, a snail)



The traditional symbol of degrowth is illustrated with a snail. The reasons are not necessarily because its connotations to self-sufficiency, resilience, or its small size. The reason is because the snail's shell house doesn't outgrow the snail itself. Put differently, if the shell was to grow one additional circular ring, its size would increase as much as sixteen times: this exponential growth wouldn't contribute to its well-being, on the contrary it would be a burden. (Illich, 1982) Degrowth emerged from culturalism with its critique of development as unilinear, and ecological economics (Muraca, 2013, 150), recognising how an economy shouldn't extract more than ecosystems can generate, recognising biophysical limits.

North-South dimensions

“High-income countries, which represent only 16% of the world population, are responsible for 74% of resource use in excess of fair shares and are therefore the primary drivers of global environmental degradation, representing a process of ecological colonisation.” (Hickel, O'Neill, Fanning, Zoomkawala, 2023, 346) Social anthropologist, Hickel, refers to the ongoing North-South dichotomy with all socially unequal impacts of climate change as an *atmospheric colonisation* (Hickel, 2022a, 109) to illuminate the historically entrenched and very much present North-South dichotomy, as the global South extracts resources maintaining a prevailing ecomodernist discourse in the global North.

As colonialism is something some people might assess to be something of the past, the GDP per capita comparing the global North and global South is four times larger today than it was at the end of colonialism (Hickel, 2022a, 97). Rendered in per capita terms the material footprint of an average person is 8 tons per person – while as high-income nations "blow past that boundary

nearly forty times over.” (Hickel, 2022a, 109) For a relevant comparison, in 2023, the *Earth overshoot day*, indicating the day in which a country has used all its resources for one year, the date in Norway was estimated to be one of the first in the world, being 12th of April (Greenpeace, 2023) in comparison with the global date that fell the 2nd of August in 2023. (Overshoot, 2023)

Economic myths

The argument upheld by some, stating that growth is a ‘universal human drive’ (Stoknes, 2020) and a natural human tendency, isn’t natural according to degrowthers, as the growth attitude rather “springs from a specific institution order” (Romano, 2021, 5), as empirically backed by multiple economic anthropologists (Polanyi, 2001: Hickel, 2022b). The degrowth movement, with its multifaceted disciplines using sociological, anthropological and psychoanalytical critiques of the myth about *Homo economicus* (Richter, 2019: Raworth, 2017: Kallis, 2019, 32: Jakobsen, 2019, 310), critiques the Western cultural ideal about development for the sake of development and growth for the sake of growth (Hamilton, 2003: Jackson, 2017), ultimately opening up for open relocalisation in which the well-being of humans and non-humans entangled within ecosystems is considered the main goal opposed to profit and economic growth (Kohtari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria, Acosta, 2019). As posed in recent work, “Addressing the aggravating social-ecological crises of our time demands a fundamental rethinking of our economic system.” (Durand, Hofferberth, Schmelzer, 2024, 7)

“Profit motivations crowd out moral or altruistic behaviours and social wellbeing diminishes as a result.” (D’Alisa et al. 2015, 6) By coming to terms with that we are social beings seeking meaningful connections (Honoré, 2004) and purpose in how we spend our time (Graeber, 2018), we arguably also recognise that “Prosperity transcends material concerns. Doing well consists in part in our ability to participate in the life of society, in our sense of shared meaning and purpose, in our capacity to create and to care and to dream” (Jackson, 2017, 216), as posed by ecological economist Tim Jackson advocating for post-growth. Following ecofeminism, “the focus on care shifts degrowth from being a negative downscaling of production and consumption to being a set of ethical practices that allow human environmental wellbeing to flourish.” (Mehta & Harcourt, 2021, 2)

“Trying to fill real but nonmaterial needs – for identity, community, self-esteem, challenge, love, joy – with material things is to set up an unquenchable appetite for false solutions to never-satisfied longings. A society that allows itself to satisfy them, would require much lower material

and energy throughputs and would provide much higher levels of human fulfillment.” (Meadows, Randers, Meadows, 2004, 262)

According to multiple degrowth scholars, we intellectually find ourselves in a multi-faceted systemic crisis with loss of historic meaning (Acosta & Kohtari et.al. 2019, 280), also referred to by some as ‘the meaning crisis’, or the ‘polycrisis’. According to French psychoanalytic Jacques Lacan we are through the ‘discourse of the capitalist’ led into a *psychosocial drift*: in the need of immediate satisfactions that supposedly are fulfilled inside oneself individually, we are neglecting, and being neglected, our interrelational needs. From a communitarian perspective this translates to a loss of meaning, or an “anthropological deprivation” (Romano, 2021, 27), possibly being experienced through feelings such as loss of purpose. Tim Jacksons follow-up book after *Prosperity without Growth* (2017), named *Post-growth: Life after capitalism* (2021) is “dedicated to untangling the anthropological lunacy of an economy that serves profit rather than the people, their subsistence, and, ultimately, their purpose in life” (Bruns, 2021).

Degrowth and postgrowth

The term *degrowth* is a strong one, springing out of critical assessments of our convictions of development, expansion, etc., in which strength arguably is its waterproofness for co-optation. An example of a co-opted term is ‘sustainable development’, others can be ‘green’, ‘organic’, etc. Co-optation is referring to when something is used for capitalistic purposes. As the word degrowth itself inherently poses an “anti”, it’s difficult to co-opt from capitalist interests.

Degrowth is typically referred to as a transition, and a process, and *postgrowth* as a destination, or final state (Parrique, 2023; Muraca, 2013). Purely linguistically, post-growth is typically considered a more ‘edible term’ than degrowth, as it poses a state that is, as famously phrased by advocate for doughnut economics, Kate Raworth, agnostic to growth (Raworth, 2017, 243) – which is the aim of degrowth.

“Prosperity consists in our ability to flourish as human beings – within the ecological limits of a finite planet. The challenge for our society is to create the conditions under which this is possible. It is the most urgent task of our times.” (Jackson, 2017, 22)

Policy proposals

A major typical objection to degrowth is that it is purely theoretical and doesn't pose any practical policies. As the degrowth literature has five folded since 2014, back when there were only 220 texts on policies, published texts on policies grew to 1166 by the end of 2022 (Fitzpatrick et al, 2022, 2). Before going on with looking into actor groups takes on degrowth, it is important to illustrate what kinds of policies degrowth promotes and suggests, as it is no longer just 'a theoretical left-winged ideology': rather it is a set of possible approaches towards critically addressing the presumed necessity of economic growth taking place on the compromise of all else. The referred degrowth scholars have mapped 530 degrowth policy proposals from literature between 2005 and 2020 and identified three broad policy goals for degrowth:

1. Reduce the environmental impact of human activities.
2. Redistribute income and wealth within and between countries.
3. Promote the transition from a materialistic to a convivial, participatory society.

The *core proposals* of degrowth were the ones the scholars found to be most popularly devoted in their analysis: universal basic incomes, work-time reductions, job guarantees with a living wage, maximum income caps, declining caps on resource use and emissions profit cooperatives, holding deliberative forums, reclaiming the commons, establishing ecovillages, and housing cooperatives. (Fitzpatrick et al, 2022, 8) *Peripheral proposals* include “reducing military spending, ensuring media independence, redistributing undesirable jobs and limiting trade.” (Fitzpatrick et al, 2022, 9) The scholars underscore that change-makers should study the positive and negative synergies between the policy proposals suggested in the degrowth literature, as “it would be naïve for anyone aspiring for systemic change to focus policy-making efforts on one silver bullet policy.” (Ibid)

Later, I will draw my interview question from the core proposals, as to better disseminate actors' discourses on degrowth.

Decoupling

Decoupling refers to the ability of an economy to maintain economic growth, typically measured in GDP (Gross Domestic Product), while at the same time not proportionally increasing resource consumption or environmental impact and can either happen to be relative or absolute. In other words, “The adequate decoupling of economic activity and environmental pressures remains

theoretically possible if resource productivity grows sufficiently faster than GDP permanently and globally.” (Parrique, 2019, 97) As put by ecological economist and advocate of post growth, Tim Jackson, “Absolute decoupling refers to the situation when resource use (or emissions) decline in absolute terms, even as economic output continues to rise.” (Jackson, 2017, 84) Relative decoupling implies resource impacts declination relative to GDP. So, while the green growth discourse is relying on absolute decoupling to take place, the trends taking place since 1990 has been the opposite, where growth in material consumption is on par with growth in GDP (Vatn, 2021, 159).

The main problem of absolute, or sufficient, decoupling is its empirical absence empirically speaking, as we have yet to see evidence that it works on the scales that are deemed necessary from data the last two decades (Parrique, 2019, 104: Parrique et al. 2019: Hickel, 2023: Hickel, Kallis 2020, 470: Tenório, 2021). The reasons are connected to *rebound effects* (efficiency changes that can rebound into more consumption, referred to as ‘*Jevons paradox*’ (Hickel, 2022)), *problem shifting* as “substituting one problem like climate change for another such as biodiversity loss cannot be considered problem solving” (Parrique et al, 2019, 49), insufficient and inappropriate technological change (Amundsen 2023), and more.

A fresh study on decoupling and the feasibility of reaching our Paris Agreement target found that current rates of decoupling in high-income are falling far short of what is needed to limit global heating to well below 2°C, as set out by the Paris Agreement (IPCC, 2023, 57: Vogel, Hickel, 2023) suggesting that “if high-income countries are to reduce emissions in line with the Paris Agreement, they will need to abandon the pursuit of aggregate economic growth and instead adopt equitable and sufficiency-oriented post-growth policies.” (Vogel & Hickel, 2023, 767)

“(…) policymakers have to acknowledge the fact that addressing the climate and biodiversity crises (...) may require a direct downscaling of economic production and consumption in the wealthiest countries. In other words, we advocate a shift in priorities from efficiency to sufficiency, with the latter being put before the former.” (Parrique et al. 2019, 58)

The scientific community's' response to decoupling's absence

Arguably, because of all the empirical science stating our lack of absolute/sufficient decoupling at the scales necessary, new research in 2023 conducted a survey among nearly 800 academics and reveals that the idea of green growth is losing traction among climate policy researchers, underscoring the importance of considering alternative post-growth models and

perspectives (King, Savin, Drews, 2023). In contrast to the majority of 73% of the climate scientists which preferred *a-* and *degrowth*, “economists and engineers showed the highest preference for green growth, possibly indicative of trust in technological progress and conventional economic models that suggest economic growth and climate goals are compatible.” (Ibid)

Degrowth rely on the growing amount of scientific evidence that absolute decoupling is not feasible nor realistic at the global scale required (Parrique et al. 2019: Jackson, 2017: Kallis, Giorgos, Federico Demaria & Giacomo D’Alisa 2015: Tenório 2021: Parrique 2020) Degrowth also recognises the logical incoherence with unilinear economic growth being assumed an inherent good, pointed out by economist Daley: “after a certain point growth begins to become ‘uneconomic’: it begins to create more ‘illth’ than wealth.” (as quoted in Hickel, 2022a, 179)

Prevalence of degrowth related research

Even though degrowth isn’t much prevalent in the Norwegian discourse explicitly, the international Norwegian prize of science, the Holberg prize 2023, was won by the ecological economist and political ecologist Joan Martinez-Aliér. Martinez-Allér’s work revolves around and discusses the importance for rich countries in the global North to *begin a sustainable degrowth transition* (Martinez-Aliér, 2012); granting *ecological space* by addressing what he refers to as the ‘ecological debt’ (Holbergprisen, 2023) for the global South to grow, in the name of environmental justice (Andersson, 2019, 7). According to the Martinez-Aliér, sustainability challenges will remain unsolved as long as eternal economic growth stays a prerequisite for how we organise our societies (Haarstad, 2023), being a clear voice for degrowth. Additionally, the Norwegian University of Technology (NTNU) together with the University of Oslo recently received resources to start a research centre for post-growth futures (Antonsen, 2023), manifesting a recognition of academic importance.

In 2020 there was a public call for system change signed by 75 prominent Norwegian academics and cultural figures stating that “The research is clear, we are in the process of undermining our basis for existence. (...) Technology cannot save us. (...) So, let’s put democracy to use for what it was intended for – to design a society that we, nature and the future can live with. A system change that challenges the growth paradigm will seem threatening to many of today’s rich and powerful” (Smith et al, 2020, translated). This critical stance from many Norwegian cultural and intellectual figures called for further democratisation, underscored skepticism to technological

optimism and prefaced the need to challenge the growth paradigm. Similarly, put forwardly by some more prominent societal critiques:

"We have realised how we are held captive in the hope that there will be a technological solution and that we will be saved, even though this is unlikely to be the case. While we wait for the solution, we continue as if nothing has happened. It is as if the technological solution has become ideology, and ideology, as we all know, is blind." (Willigsen, Vetlesen, 2018, 125, translated)

In the lines of recognising limits, during the climate committee of 2023s presentation of their policy proposals for Norway to achieve becoming a zero-emission society by 2050, the leader of the committee Martin Skancke emphasised the fundamentally different conclusion they drew, compared to the energy committee of 2023, in which headline of their report went: "More of everything – and faster" (NOU 2023:3). As the energy committee's mandate was to find lower electricity prices for the country, and the climate committee's mandate was to establish a path to the low-emission society by 2050, their conclusions represent the present frictions, and arguably incommensurabilities, of various contemporary stakeholders and interests. The climate committee report and policy proposals underscore the importance of the recognition of scarcities, and to paraphrase Skancke's speech: "We must learn and relearn resource scarcity. We have learned growth, growth, growth."

As a result of IPCC assessment reports (IPCC, 2023: Arent et al, 2014) a framework called Avoid, Shift and Reduce was developed as a tool to push for the necessity of scaling down the overall societal metabolism of societies: minimising production, consumption, and waste. In Norway this framework is utilised as well and it is applicable for all sectors of society and is an overall important tool to promote a practice of more circular economy (NOU, 2023:25, 125). This is important to take notice of as we have international policy premises undermining the importance of downscaling and reducing our overall resource use and acknowledging the importance of moving towards society planning with the presence of boundaries ought to be respected for the common good. As wisely formulated by degrowth scholar Giorgos Kallis on this, "It is when we realize that in a certain sense there are no external limits, that we should limit ourselves." (Kallis, 2019, 73)

Ecomodernism

Ecomodernism, or ecological modernisation, is an environmental discourse and philosophy which holds the belief technological progress and development can reduce environmental

impact, thereby protecting nature, meanwhile improving people's standard of living. (Breewood & Garnett, 2022) Ecomodernism overarching aim is to decouple GHG emissions from GDP growth through the three primary strategies of: technologically 'green' inventions and entrepreneurship, resource efficiency, and sustainable intensification of land use, typically through urbanisation. (Asafu-Adjave et al. 2015) A central idea and principle in ecomodernism is that «progress can steadily diminish the impact of people of the Earth rather than increasing it» (Robbins, 2020, 240)

The ecomodernist position is critical towards there being biophysical trespassable limits. As stated in the Ecomodernist manifesto: «To the degree to which there are fixed physical boundaries to human consumption, they are so theoretical as to be functionally irrelevant» (Asafu-Adjave et al, 2015, 10). This presupposition is highly relevant in the political ecology debate on limits that I touched upon earlier. In this way, ecomodernism stands diametrically opposed to degrowth. As a cause of ecomodernists proclamations of boundaries isn't anything given, bearing the implication of not having to plan accordingly, the position has been heavily criticised as it neglects the threshold indicators of the planetary boundaries' framework, in the sense that it always can be lingering to push them further back according to the needs of set aims.

As technological optimism is something that is central in the ecomodernist ideas, the ecomodernist perspective regards its potential and its innovative powers to be pivotal for reconciling economic growth and environmental sustainability and assess the powers of future technologies to be a certain saviour (Grunwald, 2018), by assuming that future technological innovations like i.e. carbon capture storage and other technologies will through efficiency reconfigure our problems. In this manner it is somewhat alike the green growth discourse, that we will get to now, which "develops on the assumption that future [technological] innovations soon to come would do away with that [negative externalities]" (Parrique et al, 2019)

Sustainable development and green growth

Historically speaking, the Brundtland Commission and their world-famous report *Our Common Future* stated that both technological and social organisations should be handled to make another era of economic growth possible: "What is needed now is a new era of economic growth - growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable." (Brundtland Commission, 1987, 7) Even though the commission did address the growing social

inequalities, and the climatic and environmental challenges, the report carried arguably unintended justifications of economic growth as the end, and social and natural resources as means (Vetlesen, 2024). Hence, 'sustainable development' has been widely, internationally acknowledged as a 'win-win narrative' (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2018), "requiring nobody "to change their ways in any fundamental manner and to abandon their positions of privilege". (Vetlesen, 2024, 16) This win-win approach is arguably carried forward by ecological modernism, as limits to growth conveyed a message of a zero-sum and unprofitable game, ecomodernism highlight opportunities for continued economic growth (Hammer, 2016, 203)

Green growth

"In order to tackle many of the growth and development challenges [...] without compromising future growth and poverty reduction goals, the concept of green growth has emerged as a new approach to reframe the conventional growth model to re-assess many of the investment decisions in meeting energy, agriculture, water needs and the resource demands of economic growth. OECD defines **green growth as a means to foster economic growth and development** while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies." (OECD, 2019, bolded)

As clearly stated here by the OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, green growth is in many ways the basic principles of what our current economic practices strive to be: continuously growing at certain rates, ensuring enhanced welfare. As formulations around what 'green' and 'development' actually mean, among many others, Per Espen Stoknes and Johan Rockström have critiqued the United Nations Environmental for being ambiguous in their goal for a 'green economy', as their goals are listed as *create more value* and *using fewer resources* (European Commission, 2016), thereby falling short on pushing to reach these absolute targets.

Norwegian green growth advocate Stoknes underscore that in order for there to be *genuine* green growth, that would require *absolute* or sufficient decoupling (Stoknes, 2020) entailing "an increase in economic output that lowers total environmental footprint" (Stoknes & Rockström, 2018, 1), while as "gray growth can be defined as an *increase in economic output that also increases the total environmental footprint.*" (Ibid, 3). For there to be genuine green growth then, there needs to be an absolute decoupling of GDP from resource uses, that meaning the economy grows while as emissions fall (Stoknes, 2019, 43) Green growth is in this way overlapping with "the neoliberal 'mantra' of the supremacy of markets for fostering prosperity through ever growing efficiency" (Martínez-Allier, 2010, 1). There is in other words fundamental

differences between grey and green growth, and as an absolute decoupling isn't what is happening, our current ways of economic growth are what the two scientists illustrate as grey.

Regardless of multi-faceted critiques of green growth that I will get briefly show, it's arguments and suggestions that unattractive and ineffective policies would result in failing to address environmental challenges and overconsumption effectively might be the most important one to take note of.

Technological optimism

Technological optimism is arguably deeply entrenched in the Norwegian culture, with our history of oil and gas together with our world-famous politics for promoting electric cars. To illustrate the prominence of widespread optimism and arguably faith in technology, there are many examples in a Norwegian context – but to illustrate with one very visible, one of the previous prime minister Jens Stoltenberg' claims during his new year's speech back in 2007, in which he juxtaposed the positive climatic effects that carbon capture storage (CCS) will have in Norway's big investments in contrast to our huge petroleum industry: "We have to take our responsibility seriously. The climate emissions must be reduced." (Myrset, 2013, translated) Another master thesis in political ecology conducted at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences points out that the discursive power exercised in relation to carbon capture storage (CCS) in Norway is very prominent and often used in *win-win*-, and *avoiding energy crisis* narratives (Amundsen, 2023). Noticeably, by legitimization of continuation of the Norwegian "oil adventure" (In Norwegian: "det Norske oljeeventyret"), as commonly phrased in Norwegian language, the green washing-narrative is prominent through optimistic trust in technology.

Summary

Now that the diametrically different stances and takes of the ecomodernist and degrowth discourse are accounted for, by some of the ecomodernist discourse characterised by technological optimism and narratives of business-as-usual springing out of arguments funded on that biophysical limits aren't necessary units of measurement, meanwhile the degrowth discourse is one recognising there are biophysical limitations that we should respect and act accordingly. I will from here clarify my research methodology.

3. Methods

I am aware that to dualistically oppose degrowth and growth arguably “(...) serves to do absolutely nothing but push us further into sectarianism that would condemn green parties to political insignificance in the same way as the path to the mainstream and political correctness.” (Lechat, 2012) This thesis is by no means written with the intention of further fragmenting the environmental, or for that matter the “red-green” movement, but rather to offer some valuable and important insights into the feasibility of socially just transitions in the forms of a more degrowth oriented policy space, as well as to offer an apprehension of various groups takes on the importance thereof. It should be noted that there arguably are many different classifications of degrowth, some of them enter consumption, pollution, decolonisation, etc., but in this paper, but my main focus is how fractious degrowth stands to the reigning discourse of ecomodernism.

Scope of focus

I decided focus this thesis on discourses on degrowth within and across representatives of various societal interests, rather than covering all related growth discourses (e.g. green growth etc.). Due to the limited scope of a 30 ECTS-thesis, I am unable to paint a picture of how degrowth could *look like* in a Norwegian context, but what I will do is contribute with filling a present knowledge gap in what the different Norwegian discourses of degrowth are like in various groups, that being reflected through representatives of academic, politic, and environmental groups. Mapping economic ones would also be of interest and importance, but the scope unfortunately doesn't allow for too much elaboration.

Study design

Methodologically, this thesis employs a qualitative study design, drawing on results from semi-structured interviews conducted with different actor groups combined with an analysis of academic articles and debates as well as media and press coverages. Interviewees were selected to cover three various actor groups ranging from political representatives, the environmental movement, and experts and academics within climate, economy, and culture. As my aim in this project is to further investigate the shared - or splitted - discourses around degrowth from various societal groups, a critical discourse analysis is therefore best suited.

There has been done a quantitative analysis (Capasso, 2021) on the usage of the words 'degrowth' and 'green growth' in certain media channels, in which the researcher suggested that

more academic clarity on terms as value and different versions thereof, would assist media in addressing topics like these in a better way. As such a quantitative mapping of this kind looking into wording already has been done, I didn't see reasons why I should do a quantitative or mixed methods approach looking into amounts of times 'degrowth' has been used since 2018. (Even though it should be noted that it clearly has become a much more prominent word in various media outlets since then.) I additionally don't necessarily believe that quantifying the number of times certain terms are used captures the gravitas of the concept in how serious we act upon them, the depth of the discourses and our takes on them. Corporate social responsibility policies utilizing on *strategic storytelling* (Røvik, 2007, 202), like terms of *sustainability* or *green* that are often used as effective market tools (Leichenko, O'Brien, 2019, 275) they may proclaim to abide certain principles and practices, but that doesn't necessarily entail it is a practiced manner. Therefore, I considered it to be more fruitful to investigate the substance of various groups takes on the discourse applying qualitative methods.

In my result section I have decided to first present key informants and experts in the field on the topic of degrowth in a Norwegian context, as this provides valuable insights that frame the subsequent views, making dissemination of discourses and the like more tangible. Onwards I present the interviews with environmental organisations and lastly the political ones. I deliberately decided to use direct quotations in my discussion part to illuminate how these topics are being spoken about, as I assess this to be central for the discourses at play.

Data collection

All together I formally conveyed 17 interviews in total in which I all transcribed and sent to the participants. As for my methodological transparency, I chose to follow a semi-structured interview-system which allows for more flexibility in changing the order of questions as degrowth touches upon social, economic, and ecological issues, as I wasn't going to touch upon the exact same topics or problems with all of my informants inhabiting different stances and knowledges on the topic, it was important to ensure some spontaneous, serendipitous dynamics. The semi-structured interview method allowed me to ask extensive follow-up questions if needed to be brought up under the session, based on the responses given by the participants. With open ended questions, the informants could speak quite freely around key topics of importance. I had some ready formulated questions that I prepared based on my prior research in literary scope reviews on degrowth strategies, theory, practical implications, and possible policies. To ensure the relevance and quality of my questions, I discussed them with two professors and a

colleague. From there, I sought to map the various groups takes on the degrowth discourse, through questions directly and indirectly: addressing what their views are on the movement, what should be done, and more that I will now come to. In order to ensure validity and reliability of my qualitative data findings, I in the beginning of all my interviews explained my thesis objective again, after having sent a written note on what it is ultimately about, to ensure that the participants were on board (Aung, Razak, Nazry, 2021)

Additionally to all my formal interviews which I am using in this thesis, I conducted six other informal “pre-interviews” with academics to better steer my course for further understanding the issues of degrowth: the conversations were centred around practical and theoretical problems with degrowth, and various disciplines perspectives (political science, philosophy, psychology, with more) on the matter. More specifically, I spoke and discussed with PhDs and Professors of various disciplines in social sciences and economics, as shown in the table on academics. These served to develop the questionnaires and gave me an overall background context seen from various disciplinary perspectives. This multiple layered process has potentially enhanced the overall validity of my data collection, allowing a holistic and transparent approach. An additional action I did to ensure a process of triangulation, was that I throughout the project included literary scope reviews, reflections with colleagues and academics of various disciplinary backgrounds.

All my interviews were conducted in Norwegian, except for one that was done with a PhD student that was eager to not ‘get lost in translation’. This is something I could have done different, I could have initiated all my interview to take place in the English language - but as Norwegian is the mother tongue of all(?) participants involved, certain nuances on the topics of interest linguistically may easier present themselves in Norwegian, it was my deliberative choice. I touch upon this later in the discussion, part regarding ‘the green transition’. When transcribing the interviews, I translated the parts of the interviews I wished to highlight into English. This is important to preface, as it is not written in the original language spoken which may impact nuances. All informants verbally accepted the interview recordings that all were conducted and recorded on zoom, except for one that was conducted physically and that I recorded on my phone. I did this to ensure the reliability of the data. Moreover, my informants were allowed to review their interview transcripts and come with feedback to ensure that their views were thoroughly and rightfully represented. All my participants read their transcripts and approved them. Therefore, I am certain that my transcripts are capturing their stances properly, and not colouring their stances by my perceptions of them.

Limitations

As for my limitations on this research, there was not space nor time to also focus on ecomodernism to the extent I would have liked to, even though this would be interesting to deeper delve into and investigate the dynamics between the two discourses in more depth. This was because my focus and research questions were set on degrowth and the space limited. Additionally, I unfortunately didn't dedicate space to critique and account for the more practical discussions on degrowth, which also would be interesting. I would preferably have granted more space to critically discuss both degrowth and ecomodernism, but as pointed to that the focus was on the receptive ends rather than the communicators, and on degrowth specifically, it is logical that the result became to be this way. As what goes for my choice of interviewing academics with extensive knowledge on degrowth particularly, with them also arguing favourably, I made this decision because I deemed it important to have expertise knowledge on degrowth as a base to work from. It can arguably be a limitation that I didn't also interview outspoken opposers to include critical voices to it, but this wasn't my overall goal. Rather it was to enlighten how various societal actors interpret and understand it.

Reliability and transferability

It should be noted that I decided on focusing on the Norwegian context that is in a peculiar economic situation, and my findings should therefore not easily be transferred to other contexts, with different economic and geopolitical situations. My results are not necessarily transferable, as the informants I interviewed represent their own individual views as well as the roles of the groups they inherent. I ensured to used data from various sources to enhance overall triangulation. I wanted to conduct this research as I was curious to better grasp the overlapping or contradictory views on degrowth (and green growth) within these groups as they arguable are stakeholders of various interests.

Sampling process

The first stage of my sampling process comprised targeting my sample population (Bryman, 2016) because I wanted to provide various aspects of the discourses at play, I represent political and academic representatives, and environmental organisations. I methodologically did *purposive sampling*, to get relevant organisations and people that I have deemed to be

relevance to the research questions (Bryman, 2016, 418) and discourse topic. The spokes persons represented from the political parties and the environmental organisations were decided by their hand (purposive and convenient sampling) based on the information that I gave them on my research project. But the academics that I interviewed were handpicked by me, being a purposive sampling. This work involves qualitative data gathered from three various interest groups for comparison and grasping their various stances and interpretations – by comparing interviews with academics with an expertise on, among other fields, ecological economists, sociologist, social and political scientist, climate adaptation, this was important to be able to compare with what the political and environmental representatives said.

Interest and transparency

As I wanted to gain a better understanding and insights in the overlapping, and/or contradictions and differences, in between the various interest groups and stake holders takes on *socially just transformation*-options like that degrowth represents, I decided on interviewing the groups representing environmental, political and academic interests. Rather than going in-depth in one specific discourse understanding and/or interpretation, I deem it to be more fruitful of a wider apprehension on actors take on the discourse, as societal dynamics interrelate and feeds or weakens each other. Another central point of not analysing degrowth from the 'inside' is that "Arguing in favor of degrowth runs a serious risk of preaching to the choir, i.e. convincing only already-believers." (van der Bergh, 2011, 889), also keeping in mind how common it can be for thesis-students to analyse i.e. ecovillages that for the outer eye seem extreme and 'kumbaya'. Degrowth is bigger, deeper, and more broadly manifested as a growing movement, and to present it as only taking place in ecovillages would therefore be a mistake.

To explicitly reflect on my positionality (Nygaard, 2017, 114) and be transparent of possible biases, I am personally a national board member of the organisation Rethinking Economics Norway and a member of the newly started organisation of degrowth in Norway (NO: Vekstfri Norge). As this research is something I am spending a lot of time looking into, and personally assess developments in the lines of degrowth to be fruitful, I am aware that my positioning is biased. On the other hand, these are topics that I am well educated in with academic insights to, also having spent a large amount of time doing literary scope reviews on ongoing international debates, arguments and perspectives. As it is important to be transparent on one's own stance, I would like to underscore that I don't believe that degrowth is the *only* way to go, it is in other

words not an ideological conviction. Rather, it appeals to my both intellectually and emotionally. As I am aware of the importance to not put all of one's eggs in *one* basket, I acknowledge the importance of the questions addressed by the movement and the fruitfulness of some of its various solutions. But because of I am highly aware of this - and throughout the process have sought to speak with also dissenters of persona, and of literature, proper triangulation, etc. - this does not decrease my scientific validity.

Sampling of informants

Political representatives

To have a representative share of the political parties I intended, and have invited, to interview all of them. The political parties that I did interview in the order of left-right tendencies were: Rødt (Red), SV (socialist left), Miljøpartiet de Grønne (The Greens), Venstre (Left), Arbeiderpartiet (Labour party) and Senterpartiet (The Center party). Neither Kristlig folkeparti (The Christian Democratic party) Høyre (the Right/Conservative party), nor Fremskrittspartiet (FrP) found the time to participate in interviews after several attempts to reach them. Høyre sent me a statement through mail that I will get back to in my discussion. My political sample therefore consists of 6 out of the nationally biggest 9 parties.

As neither the most conservative parties: the largest conservative one, the far right one, nor the Christian Democratic could participate, this surely affects my findings in the verbal interviews, as all voices aren't included and the political landscape can appear to be somewhat less *ecomodernist* as the full scope of relevant power holders isn't represented.

To guarantee full representation, I contacted all the biggest and most established political parties, that being all the parties that have access to the parliament and possess influential power. I contacted them all through e-mail and phone and told them about my thesis project in international environmental studies, and what I wished to ask them questions about.

Table 1: **Overview over the main political parties in Norway** (names written in black were interviewed (one person representing each party), names written in grey were contacted for interviews but did not participate in an interview.

Norwegian name	English name	Comments
Rødt (R)	The Red Party	
Sosialistisk venstreparti (SV)	The Socialist Left Party	

Miljøpartiet de grønne (MDG)	The Green Party	
Venstre (V)	The Liberal Party	
Senterpartiet (SP)	The Centre Party	Ruling party
Arbeiderpartiet (AP)	The Labour Party	Ruling party
Høyre (H)	The Conservative Party	Not interviewed
Kristlig folkeparti (KRF)	The Christian Democratic Party	Not interviewed
Fremskrittspartiet (FRP)	The Progress Party	Not interviewed

I would most likely have seen some quite different trends and perspectives if I had to interview the youth organisations of the political, as was pinpointed by the informant from the Labour party, as i.e. he told me about the growth criticism that grew large in the 90s connected to larger personas in the environmental movement at the time. To compare political youth parties with the established one would therefore probably be interesting to indicate possible future political dynamics and different scopes of focus from the reigning ones now.

Environmental organisations

As NGOs don't have direct economic interests or incentives, they could arguably be characterised as presenting civil society, but as they represent the environmental movement more specifically, I am referring to them in this way.

The sample of representatives from the environmental movements would preferably have been bigger, but unfortunately many didn't find the time to participate. My sample consists of 4 different non-governmental organisations, being Norway's oldest solidarity and environmental organisation Framtiden i våre hender (the Future Is In Our Hands, for short: FIVH), Naturvernforbundet (N for short, Friends of the Earth Norway), the international organisation WWF (World Wildlife Fund) and Spire ('Sprout'), regionally the biggest nature and justice organisation for youth. I intended there to more and tried reaching the think tank Bellona, as it is often considered an important part of the environmental wing in the Norwegian landscape, and the ideal organisation ZERO (Zero Emission Resource Organisation) but was declined. Neither Natur og Ungdom (Friends of the Earth Norway's youth branch), nor Greenpeace had the capacity.

Even though I didn't interview anyone on *behalf* of Rethinking Economics, as they are not an environmental organisation but rather a movement of alternative voices seeking to make the

economics taught and conveyed more pluralistic, I did interview four academics affiliated with the organisation.

Table 2: **Overview over environmental organisations in Norway** (names written in black were interviewed (one person representing each organisation), names written in grey were contacted for interviews but did not participate in an interview.

Norwegian name	English name	Comments
Naturvernforbundet	Friends of the earth	
Framtiden I våre hender	The future is in our hands	
WWF	WWF	
Spire	Sprout	
Natur og Ungdom	Friends of the earth, youth	Not interviewed
Greenpeace	Greenpeace	Not interviewed
Zero	Zero Emission Resource Organisation	Not interviewed

Academics

As degrowth is a movement based on interdisciplinary research and ongoing debates on economic, environmental, and ecological justice, born from social movements and academic research: academics are crucial to include in this dissertation to better answer my research questions. Academics arguably represent *their* personal stances, but as they are the ones with the most extensive expertise on topics revolving degrowth, it is important to involve their perspectives on it.

Table 3: **Overview over academics interviewed** (names written in black were formally interviewed and used, names written in grey were used for triangulated purposes before and during the formal interviews to get a proper overview over the topic)

Profession	Referred to as
Professor in ecological economics	A1
Freelance writer and ecological economist	A2
(Retired) Professor in neoclassical economics	A3
Professor in social anthropology	A4
Social scientist, writer, and politician for the Green Party	A5
Researcher and Professor in climate adaptation	A6
PhD student in entrepreneurship	A7

Professor in philosophy
Professor in anthropology
Professor in ecological economics
PhD in ecological economics
PhD in business and economics
Activist and farmer

The seven academics I interviewed were from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds. My sample of informants is characterised by representing various disciplines within social sciences with broad insights and knowledge on justice, climate adaptation, environmental governance, politics, and economy. Due to the nature of my research questions and the scope of my project, my sample technique for some of the academic informants had as a requirement that participants possessed a basic level of expertise both of ecology and economy, therefore I interviewed three ecological economists. For my sample of economists not to only consist of ecological economists, I also interviewed one with an educational background in neo classical economics and one on entrepreneurship to possibly get other perspectives. It is important to underscore that ecological economics isn't the most prevalent kind of economics, neither institutionalised nor taught, as earlier touched upon. Ecological economists *can* be perceived as radical from other genres within economics, as: "While green economics defines growth as part of solutions to social and environmental challenges, growth is perceived as the core of the problem within ecological economics" (Storsletten, Jakobsen, 2016, 33, translated self).

Sample reflections: I did also conduct many more dialogues with various 'academic experts' that weren't formal interviews working on this project in the start phase. I could have decided to formally interview more experts from natural sciences, on ecology, climate mitigation, etc., but I prioritised the perspectives of social sciences that, as touched upon earlier, can be neglected in contexts of societal planning, etc. and have important insights worthy of inclusion in such a thesis. Because degrowth encompasses a theoretical realm of cultural values, conviviality, senses of purpose, socio-economic structures, etc., I deemed it to be fruitful to speak with those of the profession that has to do with these various trails of thought. This also because I deem it to be of great importance to include informants based on the requirement of having a certain level of expertise of ecology and economy, I made this decision, as I wanted to interview experts with knowledge on degrowth.

Interview questions

I was not necessarily very interested in the specific answers to of all the questions I raised, but was more curious to elicit general views and positions of the various societal agents to better grasp the discourses at play. I additionally didn't necessarily intend for all my questions to be emphasized and used in the finished thesis, but I wanted to get a better grasp of my informants takes, stances and interpretations of degrees of importance. All the interview questions utilised in the formal interviews are in the appendix.

Here I visualise how I deemed my interview questions to overlap with the degrowth policy group proposals mapped by Fitzpatrick et al in 2022, in order for any further claims on groups overlap with a degrowth discourse is present or not, I deemed it of importance to be transparent on this. Especially as ambiguousness arguably is the Achilles heel of degrowth, I deem to be of utmost importance.

Table 4: Visualisation of associations to interview questions

Degrowth policy group proposals (Fitzpatrick et al, 2022, 9)	Connecting with interview questions
1: Reduce the environmental impact of human activities	1. How does your political party relate to planetary boundaries? 2. What barriers do you experience that make it politically challenging to be proactive? 5. How should Norway, as one of the richest countries in the world, 'lead the way' in environmental and social policy? 6c. Prohibit planned obsolescence and make repair of products more available?
2: Redistribute income and wealth within and between countries	5. How should Norway, as one of the richest countries in the world, 'lead the way' in environmental and social policy? 6d. To set roofs for maximum salaries (also opening up for them to talk about how to raise the poorest)
3: Promote the transition from a materialistic to a convivial, participatory society	6a. reduced working time 6b. less consumption 6c. Prohibit planned obsolescence 6e. universal basic income

4. Findings

Academics

The green transition

To better understand the academics stances on what is important in the wider context of where we currently are, I asked them about their thoughts and reflections around the green transition. To ask about the green transition is something I have deemed to be of importance because the governmental actions and measures taken could be argued that reflect a lot of our current societal apprehensions around measurements, technological optimism and ecomodernism. It was evident that they all were concerned about the measures done thus far in 'the green transition' in Norway have not been anything near integrative and holistic enough, rather quite the opposite:

*"Norway is a special case... There is a lot of focus on the one side about the green transition and green growth - so it is a discourse that is important. We were early on with the concept of sustainability, **so Norwegian environmental policy has largely been designed so that it is in line with business as usual**" (A4)*

As shown in this specific citation, business as usual leaning, maintaining a form of status quo, 'just greener' was an emphasised point as a red thread through all the academics on the green transition. All my informants underscored the particularity of Norway's economy being funded on oil and gas, still being a big driver and focus of attention, with our self-proclaimed reputation of 'sustainable development' .. It was remarked by many of them that the green transformation in Norway unfortunately has been co-opted by green growth and seemingly innovative ideas, which presents itself as an ecomodernist discourse it is difficult to get out of.

*"The strong ideas, or ideologies around what such a "green transition" in the **Norwegian context really looks like: continued development under economic conditions**" (A4)*

Common across all the academics was the argument that it is difficult to solve the climate, environmental and social challenges all together following the current tracks we have been given. This being on the economic terms that the green transformation has come to take place within: the majority of measurements taking place in Norway focus mainly on energy and resource efficiency. It was pointed out multiple times that discussing criticism of the growth paradigm with people is common and easy, but working with people in the technology or industry on it is an uphill battle - "Green growth is kind of a basic premise" (A5) I believe that one

of my informants summarised what my other informants also were problematizing, by simply stating that:

*“The way I see it, that **is how the green the transition is taking place today: on the premises of business**. There is a lot of rhetoric around the fact that sustainability pays, and that **sustainability should pay**.” (A7)*

Many of them problematised the co-option of sustainable development and how green growth in many ways is a manifestation of this. They prefaced how the business world has been come to be perceived as a type of "saviour", with competence, power, and resources: so "they must take responsibility", but how they don't take this responsibility until it is on their own terms, in other words, until it is profitable (A7, A1, A3). Another central point present across the argumentation of most of the interviewees was how efficiency improvements also have limits:

*“**We can't improve efficiency indefinitely**. Without setting a limit on the use of resources, we have not solved anything. That is why it is a dead end, "yet another dead end", a derailment that takes our priorities, projects, and attention, instead of us getting to change society and politics into something that really pays off.” (A2)*

Neoliberal ranking systems were also problematised by many, as they might contribute to misleading understandings of superficial climatic achievements being sufficient, while not really addressing the root causes of the problem. Thus the technological centred investments taking place in the name of the green transformation rather build further on premises of business as usual. In this way green growth hand in hand with technological developments for energy efficiency doesn't contribute with any reformative or systematic changes (A1, A3, A6, A7).

*“I think **the green transition** is positive in the sense that it **helps certain symptoms**, but it does not help in the system shift: **it doesn't create anything new or reform**” (A1)*

Socio-ecological transformation

As interviews revolved around degrowth, its fruitfulness and possible limitations, it became evident to me that the ways in which different academics and researchers, with their various disciplinary backgrounds, deem degrowth to be of importance varies a lot individually. A general pattern and commonality across all the academics I interviewed, however, was that they ultimately deem an overall socio-ecological transformation and paradigm shift to be necessary,

and that degrowth potentially can play a central role in making that happen. As sharply summarised by two ecological economists,

*«Degrowth means **a system change**: from quantitative growth to qualitative development, from a competitive society to a cooperative network, from economic man and selfishness to a focus on the common good...» (A1)*

*«Not just in rich countries to reduce consumption and production, but a total project for **a social-ecological transformation**, a thorough change of society that is also about our lives, our communities and welfare» (A2)*

An argument that stood out as a red thread in all my academics argumentation for why degrowth is an important tool to facilitate for socio-ecological transformation and change was summarised by this interviewee as:

*“I think it **is important to develop a conceptual apparatus that differs from what we have now**, which is very much characterised by market thinking and economics, we have a way of talking about economics and society that is very steeped in **neoclassical and neoliberal thinking (...)**” (A7)*

According to the researcher in climate adaptation and mitigation, the term *society transformation* has exploded and completely changed meaning over the last years. It went from in the 90^s meaning very large changes in nature as result of climate change, to meaning very large changes in societies to do something against making more climate problems. It has in other words evolved from meaning climate adaptation to meaning cultural mitigation.

*“And that means very big fundamental changes in society, to avoid the intolerable changes in the climate we are facing - in that sense, I think that **degrowth can be just as relevant in climate adaptation as in mitigation** and everything else in a climate context” (A6)*

Many of the academics problematised the overall large faith in natural sciences along a general big optimism in technological solutions to solve climatic and societal problems, with the combination of the underestimation of the overall importance of social science. Problematising the neglect of social sciences, one academic interviewed described the overhanging assumption that once the objective and scientific numbers are on the table in terms of the ongoing climate and environmental crisis, things will change:

*“When you see **who rules the debate**: there are natural scientists, technologists and there are economists... Both **the humanities and social sciences have little place in the public***

debate. I would argue that there is also a problem in the environmental movement: there has been an opinion that '[when] only the natural scientific facts should be in place, then the rest would fall into place' through a green transformation of social life. I think there is a large professional underestimation here... (A5)

It was also noteworthy and conspicuous how many of them touched upon Norwegians' perceptions of themselves as an almost inherently good nation: founded on nature and peace, we estimate ourselves to be environmentally friendly and peaceful, meanwhile we also make good money on exploitation of nature and others (A1, A2, A6). This was underscored by the academics might be an obstacle for degrowth as there remains to be done a lot of mental work and processes to recognise how we are currently living at the expenses of others and nature alike (A1, A2, A5, A7). So regardless of that we might be scoring well in neoliberal forms of ranking through environmental indexes, that doesn't necessarily contribute to bigger changes (A2). This was underscored commonly among the interviewees, how we don't understand how our way of living ultimately harms people in other places, and at later times, and thus the importance of system changes rather than symptomatic treatment.

Environmentalist organisations

Framtiden i våre hender

Because of many previous similarities to the degrowth movement, I will begin with the organisation Framtiden i våre hender (FIVH) (translated: The future is in our hands). FIVH was, like the degrowth movement, established in the 1970s with lots of engagement from the public. As formulated by one of the founders, Erik Dammann, FIVH was established on "a conviction that it is possible to solve humanity's main problems, the third world's shortcomings and our abundance damages, if we can get a new economic development started that does not only start from the elite but is based on new and more conscious goals of ordinary people." (Dammann, 1976, 9) As the NGO has been critiqued for much moralism on the need of us to live more environmentally friendly, Dammann has, also along the lines of the degrowth movement, tried to preface frugality, conviviality, and abundance, rather than restrained freedom by living less resource intensively: "No, we shall certainly not give up pleasures! We will find the real ones. To become people instead of consumers." (Dammann, 1972, 169)

The organisation has arguably moved from being an outspoken system-critical one to becoming an informative actor of lobbying for environmentally sustainable and socially just change. Currently they are working on information campaigns to influence politicians to curb overconsumption by implementing a banning on throwing away unsold goods for shops, to cut valued added tax on repairs and second-hand trade (Jørgensen, 2023), but also to implement a law of food waste to prevent and reduce food waste significantly. Regardless of their history, the word degrowth, nor postgrowth, is not to find anywhere on their socials. To understand their stance now, I asked them about economic growth:

*“We as an organization are probably what you could say **agnostic about growth**. We believe that **the overall goal must be a good and safe life within the planet's tolerance limits for everyone, to reduce emissions...** whether or not this leads to growth is subordinate to that need.” (FIVH)*

FIVH made it clear that they estimate a decoupling of the economy and increased greenhouse gas emissions to happen as quickly as is needed to reach the climate targets quite unrealistic, based on what history and numbers has shown us so far. She made it clear that their stance is that the development of cutting consumption-based emissions isn't near going fast enough. Moving on to degrowth specifically, the FIVH advisor told me that,

*“The way we work with degrowth is about **consumption reduction** and that economic **growth should not be the main focus**, but rather that we focus on growth in other ways: human development, relationships and the good values in life.” (FIVH)*

She prefaced that she knows that some think about degrowth in a very strict way as they believe that economic growth is completely incompatible with a liveable planet, but pointed out that FIVH as an organisation isn't there. It was interesting to notice the outspoken scepticism towards if green growth and absolute decoupling would take place, as “we are absolutely not in near proximity”. She told me that FIVH focuses on rules and legislations, making it easier for us all as individuals to act environmentally friendly. But she told me that even though they are critical of the system, they are not consciously in favour of degrowth. The reason she repeatedly stated was that it is not entirely unthinkable that we still have economic growth, by the number of train rides in the future possibly overrunning previous airplane travels for example. Regardless of not using the degrowth term, the organisation still operates from many of the same exact principles. Seeing social inequality's coherence with environmental/climate injustice, the importance of

overall decrease in consumption and use of resources, the importance of relations and sustainable good lives.

*“FIVH has always focused **on climate justice: we have to reduce our overconsumption in richer countries**, while we think that the world's poor must be able to increase their consumption in order to live dignified lives.” (FIVH)*

Their focus on climatic justice also remains. They have recently been doing research into how unjust emissions are produced internally in Norway, where my informant made the point that ‘the average’ tend to hide the fact that there are large differences according to income, where FIVH has established that “those with a high income generally also have a much higher climate footprint and thus also the greatest capacity and potential to cut out that it goes a long way beyond the quality of life”.

Naturvernforbundet

As Naturvernforbundet (Friends of the Earth) is a nature-conservation and governance organisation, they primarily work with governance of natural areas, mapping of land use to fight deforestation, etc., but the latest years they have also begun working with exchanges of consumer goods and to facilitate the repairing of goods. This to indirectly prevent unnecessary, and reduce, material consumption, and overcome the ‘use-and-disposal society’ (NO: “bruk og kast-samfunn”). My informant - just like the researcher on climate adaptation - prefaced that being sceptical to the reigning growth paradigm comes as a premise when working with ecology, as an implication of the acceptance and awareness of the fact that there are limits to tolerance levels in everything.

As the biggest and most established organisation of natural governance in Norway, my informant prefaced there are certain political parties that more frequently ask for assistance than others: SV, MDG, V and R in particular. He told me that growth-debates have characterised the organisation especially the last 50 years, since civil disobedience (NO: Alta-saken) against a hydro plant up north in the country. But he emphasised that the debates primarily have taken place internally. I asked him why they have kept the debates internally, and his answer was that they simply aren’t listened to. In 2021 Naturvernforbundet arranged multiple discussions and talks under the name “Is green growth possible?” addressing degrowth explicitly. When I asked him about economic growth, he began problematizing how certain countries certainly need to

grow, just like certain sectors, but that *the whole* quite evidently cannot continue to grow, as there are limited resources and *limits to growth*.

“[those who work in favour of the environment] nevertheless do not take the growth debate we want to raise seriously. (...) We are probably perceived by many as utopians who only dream as it were. So, it is a reality-orientation that has meant that that debate has turned into more concrete things around and within each sector, rather than a [whole] debate about growth.” (N)

My informant was experienced working with the energy sector, which Naturvernforbundet preferably would critique openly as whole, to address fundamental questions like how much energy is necessary, for what purposes, etc. But, as debates are done within sectors, they aren't really given the opportunity of an overall critique, nor debate. To build on an overall critique of how the striving for more-mindset and framework has effects ultimately for nature conservation, my informant problematised rebound effects of different kinds, exemplifying with cost-shifting. He underscored the overall need for a very powerful decoupling in the state of us continue somewhat like we currently are, which he prefaced he is doubting whether politicians will be able to manage through simple consumption fees:

“It is difficult to see that decoupling works in a way that is improving. As far as the footprint and land consumption are concerned, we have to reduce it quite a bit, we don't just have to reduce it by 10%, we have to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 90-95% in the next few years, we have to drastically stop land development and all that, so if you're going to increase consumption in addition, it is difficult enough to just maintain today's greenhouse gas emissions”
(N)

Later in the discussion I will refer to Naturvernforbundet as N.

Spire

Spire is an environmental and development organisation working for sustainability, 20 years of age. Being a democratically led youth organisation, they focus mainly on mobilizing and organising youth, taking an outspoken and critical stance towards the growth paradigm, focusing on viable alternative societal options for means of organisation, primarily working with political influence. As one of the most outspoken environmental organisations addressing the need to overcome economic growth as the overarching aim, they argue together with Rethinking

Economics (Rethinking Economics, 2023) that we need to move away from old economic theories. As what goes for the limits and planetary boundaries, the informant problematised that 'Hurdalsplattformen' (the leading principles of the ruling government of AP and SP) isn't being followed, as neither climate nor the environment is being treated as the framework we operate under and after.

*«We have to **stop treating symptoms** and rather get to the core, and then we have to look at growth» (Spire)*

Spire works especially with influencing political parties with the goal of changing their premise from having economic growth as a goal, to move away and overcome the illogical assumption that growth equals welfare, or well-being. She stated that Spire wishes more parties were clearer on this and hopes they will adjust their courses towards the next election as, internationally speaking, social and ecological limits are screaming for.

*«In the Norwegian context: **growth does not mean the same as development**, growth is distributed very differently, we see that growth has consequences for the environment and there is no evidence that we can disconnect growth from environmental destruction» (Spire)*

Touching upon the topic of the green transformation and green growth, and how it may impact other types of policy proposals more in the lines of degrowth, my informant clearly estimated green growth to be an obstacle, referring to it 'a green resting pillow'. She postulated that green growth is dangerous for bringing about real change in society, as we don't have any evidence that we are able to decouple economic growth from resource use on the necessary scales. so it is only a theory, and that theory carries a surprising amount of weight around the world." As Spire is such an outspoken and, in many views, radical organisation, critically addressing myths of i.e. development, I asked what degrowth means to her and Spire:

*«Degrowth for me is primarily about **looking at alternatives** - it can be degrowth, a focus on development not leading to more economic growth... it can be being neutral about growth: growth can happen, but it doesn't have to. In other words, **to break away from the reigning growth paradigm**... Another approach» (Spire)*

WWF

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is a well-established international organisation from the 1960s working for endangered species conservation and environmental governance. My informant's work specifically was trying to influence the financial institutions in Norway to become more environmentally friendly. WWF are currently in dialogue with some of the biggest major financial players in Norway, like DnB, Storebrand, the oil fund, and they mainly work with biodiversity, circular economy, nature facilitation. As they have composed a 'foot-print' group, they in 2022 published an impressively condensed report conveying information about Norway's various ecological footprints; in biomass, climate emissions, phosphor, nitrogen, material and ecological footprints; clearly stating that they need to be reduced. In the report they literally call for Norway to be "*Walking the walk*" (WWF, 2022, 4), addressing the explicit need for nothing less than a paradigm shift.

*«We are very critical of the economy overriding nature's limits, the planetary boundaries, so our starting point is **that the economy must relate to and operate within nature's tolerance limits**. You must set absolute targets and not just relative targets –»*

With the extensive overview over Norway's ecological footprint, WWF's overarching goal, is for politicians to use and utilise them as a kind of **dashboard that politicians manage according to**. For an instance: "how do we manage according to the goals of material consumption? How do we increase circularity in Norwegian business and economy?" WWF prefaced that they steer out of academic discussions about 'degrowth or not to degrowth', but rather the focus is on how we can increase the circularity level by 30%. My informant told me that they are currently working on well-being indicators, which they seek to combine with the extensive overview over ecological footprints as they assess these to be more fruitful indicators for national management to utilize than GDP.

WWF works at a system level towards politics and business: influencing the state budget, election campaign, parliamentary debates. According to my informant, WWF is considered a fairly credible actor out there in relation to being included in political summons and dialogues. This is a leading factor to why he told me that they "steer a bit out of academic discussions about 'degrowth or not to degrowth', but rather the focus on, *how* can we increase the circularity level by 30%. It must also be understood and done by the business world, because they are the ones who have to do it. We need to be able to talk to Norwegian companies/firms, as they will also be the ones paying for things that they need to relate to."

He repeatedly came back to the importance of doughnut economics, and recognising that social limits are as important as ecological ones, and the need to fruitfully address both synchronously. The social ones are also completely necessary as political changes won't happen if there is a lot of resistance to climate and nature measures. A central point he underscored was how all the contemporary incentives go to maximizing profits. He presented WWF's theory of change, stating that "if we start to make visible things like footprints, and the like, in public debate and political debate, then you start to create other incentives which in the long run will make the business world move, slowly but surely..."

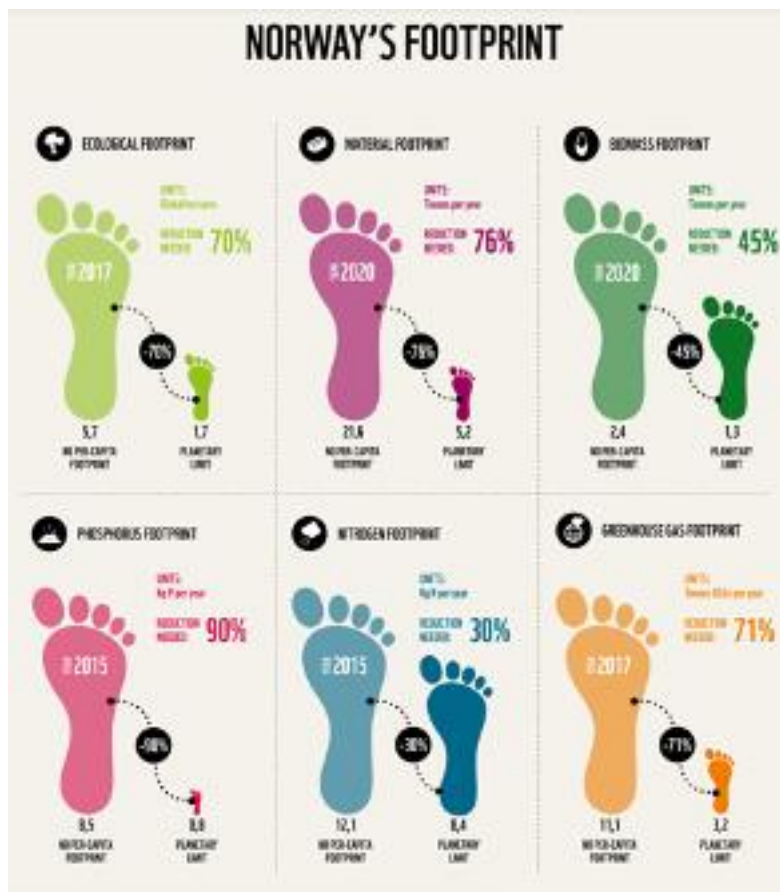


Figure 2: WWF's mapping of Norway's various ecological footprints visualise to the various extents that we are trespassing ecological limits.

Politicians

I assess some important points to clarify before later discussions of the research questions, how the various political parties' perceptions of the necessity of economic growth where we are now

first. Some of my interview questions to better disseminate their overall understanding and takes on the issues were:

- how the various parties relate to planetary boundaries (labeled: Planetary boundaries)
- whether they consider economic growth to be a prerequisite to solve the many crises we are facing (labeled: necessity of economic growth)
- what barriers they experience that makes it challenging to be proactive in politics (labelled: proactivity)
- Norway's responsibility internationally as one of the richest countries in the world (labelled: Norway's responsibility)

In this clarifying section presenting some of the findings from the interviews, I begin with showing quotations from some of their answerings of the question following, then to later clarify their overall stances to better grasp the discourses that are at play. In terms of the order, I will begin with the two ruling parties in power position, AP and SP, and then go on with the parties in the order of their interviews.

The contrasting answers to whether economic growth is a premise to solving the multifaceted issues and crises we are facing were answered very differently by various parties:

The Labour party (AP)

*“The opposite would make things far worse. (...) Our approach is that it will remain **business as usual as the basis**, within the mixed economy system that we have, which include having a big private sector, while at the same time dealing with specific problems in a concrete way.” (AP)*

Economic growth: necessary? The labour party had an answer that prefaced the importance of not risking any instability, as they assess continuing business as usual the most stable method to go about things. As AP operates with the catch phrase “develop, not liquidate” (NO: “utvikle, ikke avvikle”) in relation to the fossil fuel industry, this was an interesting point to better understand. I asked the representative what they mean by this. I was told that they see it “as absolutely crucial to bring about a transition in Europe” to additionally counteract there becoming uprisings and rebellion – their focus is therefore on the importance to fulfil the certain re-active expected demands for oil and gas, to be pro-active.

Barriers to pro-activity in politics Interestingly, the focus of my informant answer was that actions deemed necessary for long-term benefit and sustainability often lack popular support. This is an obvious issue because of political reasons, as parties see themselves relying on popular votes from the people. The informant also made the remark that even in the scenario where Norway would stop emitting and polluting completely, climate change will persist regardless because of future causal effects of all the heavy emission activities up until now. Yet he underscored that saving the climate necessitates global cooperation and contributions from all nations, in which he returned to preface that it is not just the individual effort of Norway.

Planetary boundaries On the topic of planetary boundaries, my informant made the remark that in their programme they declare that nature has its limits, and that the extinction of species is a major problem. To tackle this, they work with specific conventions, but he noted that as AP is a centralised party politically, their dilemma is that it is in their nature to embrace a fairly broad range of issues and can't really be extreme in any sense, neither in nature protection. Therefore, according to the informant, in topics with the lines of the classic growth or protection question, they seek to have the balancing attitude quite centrally in between.

Norway's responsibility internationally As I addressed Norway's responsibility, as one of the richest countries in the world, the answer emphasised that we to certain extents already are, through our large rainforest investments being one of the biggest in the world, in Amazon, Brazil and Indonesia, as that is something outside of Norwegian emissions. Also, the deliberative politics to enhance the overall use and presence of electric cars, that my informant underscored was an extremely successful policy, contributing to the newest generation of electric cars. Yet, he underscored that AP didn't think of the oil debate as relevant in this context. I followed him up on this, and he emphasised that they address that it is the demand side that matters in this matter, based on the argumentation that this ultimately is pro-active to avoid social conflicts later.

The Agrarian party (SP)

*“The system has planned for sustained growth, preferably at the 2%, like the central bank is concerned with, but that cannot verify all other decisions. (...) But I do not feel that that question characterises the debate: **economic growth or not, that is not the decisive factor - nor is it a question that is often discussed...**” (SP)*

Economic growth: necessary? The SP politicians prefaced how our entire western system is based on economic growth, but asked the constructive question how we define economic growth: by *consumption* or by *management*. He made the remark that this isn't per se 'there' in the growth term, indicating that it can mean both without further establishing his opinion on it. Either way he pointed to that these are economic theories, and that even though growth as he experiences it isn't the decisive question that characterises the debate, but that we overall steer societies to having a certain level of growth surely is important.

Planetary boundaries The representant proclaimed planetary boundaries to be a very relevant parameter to take into account in all types of planning, especially as they are a party based on primary industry and its survival, they must manage and govern in sustainable ways. To explain his wording of sustainable, he clarified: “It must be managed and operated in a way that enables multiple generations to continue operations, so it is based on a fundamental stewardship approach.” (SP) When I asked whether they have strategies to ensure to not trespass tolerance levels, the answer was clear that the diving line and a very relevant measurement parameter, as SP sees it, is whether you're a consumer or a manager.

Barriers to pro-activity in politics In his remarks on the barriers to be pro-active in politics, he made a point and problematised how politics, unfortunately, has developed into becoming a form of popularity competition with the active search light from media outlets. That being rather than political battles being elaborated in depth, the focus is being put onto superficial likeability of the political representatives. I was told that this also holds large connotations for what kinds of people we also ultimately have working in and with politics.

Norway's responsibility internationally As for Norway's responsibility internationally, I was told by the SP politician that prefaced that we have a great one, which we do take

seriously in many areas. Through investments of the oil fund, in relation to the environment and human rights is an important signal that we can send as the largest fund in the world – he emphasised this might be the clearest thing that Norway possibly can do. My informant spoke of how we might now be a great power nation, but that we surely are a humanitarian one, as one of the major contributors in the world for i.e. climate and forest initiatives by spending the most per inhabitant on preservations around the world. Even so, he underscored that Norway cannot do everything – but the funds are at least a clear direction, which has stood the tests of time through changing governments.

The Red party (R)

*“We are against perpetual economic growth and believe that we must utilise more of our production growth, such as in leisure, but there are so many people on low wages - **the earth's tolerance limits cannot cope with perpetual economic growth.** So, breaking down that growth mindset is important” (R)*

Economic growth: necessary? In responding the question whether they estimate economic growth to be important to solve the multiple predicaments that we are facing, the answer was “*No, it's quite clear*”. R is the most outspoken political party rejecting perpetual economic growth as unsustainable and unrealistic, recognising, and emphasising the need to shift away from an overall growth-centred mindset.

Planetary boundaries R argued overall to prioritise planetary boundaries in decision-making, and underscored how they should supersede the reigning growth imperatives in both environmental and climatic policies. I was told that putting the Earth's tolerance limits first is the most important parameter they try to follow.

*“We believe that **planetary boundaries should form the basis** for more or less everything we do. This is one reason why we are against wind power development at sea and on land, but also land use planning, road construction, etc. When it comes to climate and the environment, we believe **that we must put the Earth's tolerance limits in the driver's seat** ahead of polluting activities and capitalism's constant need to always grow” (R)*

Norway's responsibility internationally R's slogan is 'fair environmental policy', as put by the informant: “because we think it's important to recognise that the rich part of the world is responsible for the largest part of the cause/responsibility for climate challenges compared to

countries elsewhere globally that take the largest share of the problems despite their much smaller contribution to the problems: it's about cutting where it's fair to cut." The R politician prefaced that Norway, being so wealthy from one of the core reasons for our climatic concerns through oil and gas exports, should lead in transitioning to a sustainable renewable society. She prefaced that to phase out the petroleum industry is important to reduce the overall dependence on fossil fuels, while ensuring to do this in a democratic and publicly controlled manner to facilitate for a smooth transition. The socially just premise was there throughout her argumentation, underscoring the importance of workplaces also in the green transition, as currently jobs and capital remains to be found in the petroleum sector.

Barriers to pro-activity in politics When it comes to the barriers experienced in the way for pro-activity, the informant chose to underline financial constraints, balancing the need for renewable energy while caring for landscape conservation (the nature versus climate debate) and resistance from the public to necessary measurements in a climatic/environmental perspective. Based on this she argued for a fair environmental and climatic policy that also involves the public, to ensure inclusion the whole way. Internationally Red advocates for developed nations greater responsibility for climate changes and emphasises the overall importance of democratic processes to ensure effective implementations of various climatic policies.

The Socialist Left party (SV)

Economic growth: necessary? SV discusses economic growth in relation to the importance of a fair overall carbon tax distribution and green incentives like people's bonus to gain populist acceptance for climate measures. The party follows OECDs point that increased social inequality leads to less economic growth – therefore a politics with small social differences is an overall good economic politics.

Planetary boundaries In terms of planetary boundaries, SV pursues environmental policies that clearly considers nature's tolerance limits prioritising sustainable land use and favouring the infrastructure projects of train lines over road constructions. In terms of land use, they are among other things against further cabin development, and has a clear position on land-based wind power, which limits the development opportunities quite a lot even though they are clear that we need renewable energies.

*"I believe that because of its favourable economic status compared to most other countries, **Norway needs to lead the way** in how a society can become a low-emission society. **If a rich country can't do it, then others can't either**" (SV)*

Norway's responsibility internationally Due to Norway's favourable economic status, my informant underscored the importance of Norway playing a leading role in transition to a low-emission society to set an example for other countries to follow. It was remarked that being at the forefront of climate action also is strategic for long-term competitiveness as, "if we don't join the competition now, we risk being sidelined when other countries have made more progress. So being at the forefront is competitive in the long run" (SV)

*"This has been used as an argument in other countries, such as Congo: **why should we stop capitalising on the resources we have when Norway is doing the same?**" (SV)*

She prefaced Norway's international responsibility by acting in terms of what we externally encourage, and pointed to the two sidedness of our utilising relationship to our resources.

Barriers to pro-activity in politics The SV representant prefaced that they externally experience to be a minority representative for their integrated justice perspective. She remarked that the driving forces behind their policies isn't being shared by most voters, nor political opposers, which makes it challenging to find common ground to get a political majority, not having to compromise. Internally, she told me that there is ongoing conflict on the topic of nature versus climate crisis, where the various measurements stand in conflict to one another. She exemplified with wind power contra governance and areas, and how when they have initiated stricter policies to ensure that big capital owners don't profit on the cost of smaller societies.

The Liberal party (V)

To whether economic growth is necessary, the representative took a pause and proclaimed no - but we need to find solutions within a market economy, and not to bring in a new economic system. He was picturing how we certainly need a big growth in renewable companies, but not in oil companies or the energy part of the economy. He prefaced that a cost reduction on important matter for the green transformation is

overall very important, but whether the economy would or should grow as a whole, he said he couldn't answer.

*"We must reach the climate targets: we must reach more nature - I think everyone understands that this is also what pays off. **The challenge is not to allow short-term financial gain and destroy what is long-term important.**" (V)*

Barriers to pro-activity in politics Venstre assess the fight against global warming to be a political struggle that requires collaboration at all levels, from municipalities, companies, organisations, together with national and international entities. However, they acknowledge the barriers and the need to attain a position of power to implement change and the political battle it can be to maintain a power position, to be listened to and reach into the other parties. My informant also highlighted the challenge of scattered expertise and conflicting interests: Norway faces issues with how *silo-organised* our governance is structured, by expertise being scattered among ministries and conflicts arise.

"The agricultural organisation is very strong in the Ministry of Agriculture, oil in the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, and that's the way it will be, so we in Norway need to get involved in international processes to speed things up" (V)

As a result of this, he states we need strong political leadership, which currently remains unclear, leading to unresolved issues despite the presence of expertise which is located further down in the power hierarchies in each ministry. To resolve this and overcome the many bureaucratic barriers for quick implementations for i.e. nature restoration and governance, he argues Norway should align with targets and involve itself directly in international processes, with the EU targets, legislations, and directives.

Planetary boundaries The way V sees it, the three major problems we are facing in the world today is: global warming, the climate and environmental crisis and to stand up against dictatorship. "We need more nature, we need to protect more, restore more - we have to achieve that within the current economy, and that's the only thing that makes economic sense." He told me how they work for protected areas, 10% forest protection and ending deforestation, action plan for seabirds, prefacing the importance of having national goals of nature restoration, as it should be a commitment. He problematised how we are currently working 'bog by bog' but are lacking bigger schemes of practical ways to go about.

Norway's responsibility internationally The most important thing that the representative from the Liberal party underscore internationally is that we stick with what we say we will do: take the emission cuts that we ourselves are pushing for internationally, and the same with care taking of nature - and to further work on and develop the welfare society that we have. He also underscored that the current Norwegian aid is 1%, but that it potentially could be even larger, as he put it:

“It's not about aid, but cooperation. It is also in our own interest that they achieve their goals to protect nature” (V)

He prefaced that we will have to contribute a lot more in the coming years than we have done so far. A fruitful way to go about this is to look at it the way that each country must take its own responsibility, while at the same time seeing the self-interest of contributing much more internationally.

The Green party (MDG)

*“Our programme of principles ideologically states that **a green economy cannot be dependent on growth** - so we're not saying that degrowth solutions or anything else is the solution, what we're saying is that we have to get out of the growth constraint if we're going to have a green economy (...) We must institutionalise nature on nature's terms on not on the terms of the economy” (MDG)*

Planetary boundaries For the Greens, planetary boundaries are a physical size that all politics must adapt to. As underscored in the quote, they deem the tolerance level of nature to be of the biggest importance. The informant prefaced the overall importance of nature restoration, and the facilitation for overall resilience thereof. She explained how as nature isn't institutionalised in any applicable way, that to be a proponent of the importance of governance instead of expansion and growth therefore becomes tiresome with time. She problematised how the environmental movement, referring to them but also at large, is experiencing always being forced into positions of having to be *defensive*, and to fight to prevent expansion of industry. All that rather than getting into a position of managing to be *offensive*, to be able to think and plan on how to make long lasting changes, and to prevent all these battles to be fought all of the time.

Barriers to proactivity Importantly, the Greens problematised how economic interests are present also in the democratically based facilitations even made to empower workers in the tripartite system (which I will get back to in the discussion) as an example of how capital interests are occupying chairs on democratically set tables. On the perceived necessity of economic growth throughout the various levels of societies, from municipalities to the state, the representative underscored how big of a difference it would make if economic growth wasn't "the designated trump-card that you can use", emphasizing that by overcoming this transcending growth compulsion would also make it more tangible to solve many other challenges.

Norway's responsibility internationally For Norway's responsibility internationally, the informant underscored how our social model is considered one of the best in the world:

*"It would be absolutely fantastic if we could show that we also have a social model that is for **the best for the world**: To transform our wonderful welfare state and trust-based democracy into one that is also within nature's tolerance limits."*

The representative spoke of how wonderful it would be if Norway could show by example that it is possible to be well-functioning and providing without destroying nature, both out of a moral value, but also a symbolic one, "to the extent that we believe in western liberal democratic values."

Høyre (H)

The political party Høyre (the Conservatives) didn't participate in the interviews, but they did send me an email briefly summarising their stance on the matter of this thesis project. In the formulations in the mail from Høyre some incentives were clearly present:

«We must **cut emissions, not development**. This means that we try to **maintain** (some) **economic growth**, also **through the green transformation**. Not only that, but **the green transition** also offers many opportunities for **development and value creation** that are more sustainable and better for the planet, and Norway has a **good starting point for seizing these opportunities**.»

General findings from the interview questions

When asking the politicians what they think about less consumption, AP stated that they didn't want to intrude in how people spend their money. The Agrarian and Green party prefaced how reasonable less consumption can be to better orient ourselves towards living within the planetary boundaries (SP & MDG). Furthermore, left leaning parties were underscoring the importance to overcome the mentality of 'use and dispose' (R), and open for sharing - as put by V "We need to own less, but still have access to more". MDG, R and SV were clear on overconsumption being a driving force behind the climate and the natural crisis, that also lead to increasing social inequalities.

When I asked whether economic growth is a prerequisite to solve the different crisis we are facing, the answers varied. AP underscored that their mindset on this is that economic growth serves to a very important contribution to solve the problems, and that the opposite would do more harm than good. AP's thinking stems, according to my informant, from a business-as-usual perspective, but when there arise problems on the way (i.e. natural resources like lack of fish or forest), they certainly will tackle it with necessary regulations. SP referred to the Central Banks goal of an economic annual growth of 2% but made a point out of that "this goal shouldn't overrule other decisions" (SP). MDG and R answers were clear, stating that an actual *green economy* cannot be dependent on growing as we need to escape the growth imperative all together.

As degrowth is largely about solidarity through (re)distribution, justice, and overall sustainable well-being, it was suitable to ask the politicians about Norway's role in the bigger scheme. As I addressed Norway's responsibility internationally as one of the richest countries in the world, it was interesting to get an insight into the different perspectives on both, or either, what needs to be done or what we are doing. Proactively, SV prefaced that our economic position puts us in a position where how we can show the way to become a low-emission society. R spoke about the importance of a democratic and public de-escalation of the oil sector, co-determined by the people, meanwhile utilizing governmental instruments. While V was preoccupied that we keep our word in terms of considerably less CO² emissions, and proper governance of nature, SP prefaced that we should have high and clear demands in that which we invest in, as Norway (consider itself to be) a humanitarian country, it is important that we grant money where they are needed the most. Retrospectively, AP and SP referred to Norway's big investments in the rainforests and the large initiative to subsidise for electric cars (AP). R prefaced the importance

of a democratic and public de-escalation of the oil sector, conveyed through co-determination and government instruments.

As politicians typically get criticism for not being pro-actively enough, I asked them what challenges there are to be pro-active to them. SP made a contemporary interesting point out of how politics, unfortunately, has developed into becoming a form of popularity competition with the active search light from media outlets - that rather than political battles being elaborated in depth, focus is being put onto superficial likeability of the political representatives, that holds large connotations for what kinds of people we also ultimately have working in and with politics. R stated the issue of economy, as typically you have the bigger public resistance towards what neglects normal people's everyday life (alike the yellow vests in France). Both R and SV problematised the nature versus climate distinction that cuts deeply in questions of which mitigation practices should be implemented: (i.e. protect the environment or build green energy). As what goes for interdisciplinary work and co-operation, V problematised how silo-organised we are, which I will return to.

What goes for making maximum salaries, none of the politicians appears to have specific politics on this. SV and R, as the most left leaning parties they are considering distribution and social equality, prefaced the importance that they richest also pays most, also through a taxation of heritage. Following the lines of this argumentation, MDG underscored the importance of working against the concentration of wealth. All three of AP, SP and V argue for a progressive taxation.

In the questions related to reduced working time and universal basic income, the answers were somewhat similar and overlapping, as there are big cost discussions overall with these topics. The problematisation of that the welfare state presented itself as an obstacle, and the importance of the overall participation of citizens were raised. AP and V proclaimed that they haven't seen sufficient numbers on productivity remaining high, and SP estimated 7,5 hours of work to be a reasonable balance between work, spare time and rest. V could be positive, but somewhat sceptical to the possible societal costs, similarly MDG told me that they have become a bit vaguer on this topic the last years (as they used to be positive), because of the downscaling of salaries and the possible unjust social impacts. R stated positivity to 6 hours working day as an important change of direction, but also problematised possible unforeseen inequality gaps as a result. On this topic, multiple informants problematised that a welfare state might be an obstacle for policies like these (MDG, SV, R), and was argued that might be easier to implement in poorer countries (V).

A remark that should be noted in this section of assessments of political stances on degrowth is my obvious limitation, being that the political parties of the Conservatives, the Progressives nor the Christian democratic party were not included because they didn't participate. This would arguably influence the overall picture that I paint of the Norwegian political landscape in relation to degrowth. But, as one could assume them being less in favour, or even sceptical, towards degrowth aspirations because of their traditional market-based orientations, my group of informants are particularly interesting as some of them represent more nuanced stances by politically placed quite centred.

5. Discussion

As we have now seen, the focus of a clear majority of the political parties I interviewed, remained purely economic ones. The parties also focusing on socio-cultural shifts, implying cultural reforms in how we make our value-judgements, and arguably philosophically overcome the mechanistic world view, were the most left leaning party, R, and somewhat MDG. Before the discussion of the various views on degrowth, it is important to acknowledge the omnipotent presence and premise of economic growth first. I am bringing this up for an open recognition of that economic growth is the «default logic», rather than that these premises are openly being addressed socio-politically in democratic ways. Furthermore, these are core issues that degrowth seeks to address. This is an important point to touch upon explicitly, to recognise that degrowth by no means came to be in a vacuum, nor plays out in one.

As the growth paradigm has a tendency of being blamed and oversimplified especially by leftist, typically pointing to 'neoliberalism' or 'capitalism', it is important to take notice of that growth logics can't be reduced so easily as it should and must be understood through a welfare regime that combine the state, business, politics and civil society together with the aim of economic growth for stability (Hammer, 2016, 269) As put by a sociologist looking into the *governmentality* of Norwegian governance:

"To the extent (...) the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Progress party meet in a common discursive space, what they fundamentally agree on is that the policy must contribute to ensuring effective progress and continuous economic growth. (...) *The Nation AS* measures its success in the degree of growth and progress. Everything else must be weighed against this seemingly indisputable goal." (Hammer, 2016, 93, translated, italic)

Having established how embedded economic growth also is in our societal models, I will from here onwards use social scientific methods to disseminate how these mechanisms play out and the various views on degrowth.

Answering the research questions

Political views and interpretations

RQ1: What are the current stances of different political parties in Norway towards degrowth?

An obvious common feature of the politicians is their overall fear of losing electors and otherwise decrease in popularity as this impacts their overall power positions. The party most (outspokenly) inclined to degrowth inspired policies and arguments was R which also is the party most outspokenly sceptical of the concept of green growth because it reinforces old patterns rather than addressing root causes. Nevertheless, they don't operate with or use the term degrowth. This might have to do with being afraid of having ambiguous connotations, or being too academic or theoretical, as also stated by MDG. Compared to parties like SV and MDG might fear ideological connotations more than R, as they are more centred parties politically speaking. Regardless of their reflections on reducing the size of the overall metabolism and coming to terms with limits prevalent in their overall argumentation, degrowth seem to remain a risky endeavour of being affiliated with, as V clearly stated not believing in having it as an ideology. Regardless of not using the term, many of these parties' argumentation could be said to be somewhat like degrowth policy proposals, especially in the sense of prefacing the importance of ecological boundaries. The political parties most prone to argumentation in favour of degrowth inspired policies were the ones who also argued to overcome the growth imperative, and/or growth mindset.

Other politicians (AP, SP, V) tendence to focus on the purely technical, economic aspects, problematising whether it is necessary or viable to shrink the economy as a whole. Their focus thus remains technical, rather than sociocultural, in which attention is focused on the unsustainable societal metabolism of the global North, and the immense social inequality as a cause of the richest not taking accountability. A possible reason why this is the case for many, can be related to how strong the ecomodernist discourse stands in terms of the overall belief in technological optimism, efficiency improvements and intensifications of sustainability practices. The typical ecomodernist measurements can arguably be said to mainly do symptom treatment instead of addressing the root causes of the problems, being a fundamental difference between

the ecomodernist and degrowth discourse. It should be noted that this technoscientific unassailability itself makes a point of degrowth's critique, as they argue for democratising the economy and the overall importance of people to reclaim influence.

The most typical and common interpretations of degrowth were purely economically based on GDP (AP, SP, V). Some reflected around material, pollution growth and social aspects (V), and to some degrowth was being associated with 'negative forms of regulation', through interfering, and reducing one's private freedoms (mostly AP, not as explicit SP, V). I found the answer on whether they are acquainted with degrowth from the representative from SP, which is Norway's agrarian party, interesting:

*"It's not something we've discussed very deeply, to be honest. I understand, that's what I'm saying, that we should govern [NO: forvalte] better and consume [NO: forbruke] less ... but I don't know the [degrowth] terms and their history. But I think it is a relevant question to ask **what that growth should consist of. It must be part of the growth debate: what should grow?**"*

(SP)

The two sidedness of his response is noteworthy. On the one hand he recognises the importance of fundamental questions addressing what we should grow. Still, he underscores that economic growth isn't something that is commonly discussed or addressed. As previously touched upon with MDGs statement that economic growth is the default logic, this is an important point to underscore. When I asked political representative of the Labour party about degrowth and what the possible benefits of a societal model based on more growth free development could be, the answer of Ap was particularly interesting: as the argument about "human nature" was brought up:

"We probably don't see many advantages to it, and we don't really see how it would work (...)

*And if **it's a system that is going to last** for a long time, it **must play along with human nature**, because if it doesn't, then it stops." (AP)*

I found the essence of this argument somewhat overlapping with green growth advocate Per Espen Stoknes narrativization on human's inclination to growth, which stands in stark contrast to post- and degrowth thinkers' rebellion to this belief, counterarguing this is cultural determined. With this, it is important to note that given that one stance springs from the neo-classical economic theories, one tends to think that we all serve to maximise individual utility (in the lines of homo economicus) and that our preferences are unaffected by the institutional context,

opposed to thinking social contextual. Inhabiting a neo-classical understanding of ourselves entail the only way that institutions can operate is through and as constraints (Vatn, 2016, 95).

This is an important point as the negative aspects, disadvantages and constraints first and foremost were emphasised from APs hold, and most likely would be the case for all the right leaning parties as they preface the importance of personal (market) freedom. Worthy of mentioning, when questioning what they think about less consumption, AP prefaced that they don't want to interfere with how people spend their money. The vision of institutions as working with constraints comes clearly forward in this argumentation. As what goes for the argument around 'human nature', on the other side of the spectrum, we have post-growth advocate Tim Jackson which calls this "a *ferocious misconception* of human nature that lies in the heart of modern capitalism" (Jackson, 2017, 131)

Psychological inclination versus cultural salvation

As multiple scales of discussions on growth are a red thread in this thesis, some various takes on humans 'need of growth' should be granted some space, and later come return to answer RQ1. This is of relevance to theoretically investigate some core assumptions. Green growth advocate Stoknes contends people's *inherent* desire and inclination for more, arguing that a healthy green growth is a way to channel this psychological inclination to a positive societal change (Stoknes, 2020, 377). By emphasizing the need of redesigning the framework around capitalism and growth, rather than oppose them, Stoknes views growth as a "salvation in real life" (Stoknes, 2020, 43) and highlights what he claims to be a psychological dependence on it. However, this claim has received lots of critique as it neglects economic anthropologists' important insights into the various social organisations around goods and services, and the important role that culture plays in these schemes, as among others put forward by degrowth scholars and Rethinking Economics.

Post-, and degrowth thinkers raise awareness around the importance of re-politicising debates around 'human nature', given that within neo-classical theories portray the myth about 'homo economicus' (Jackson, 2017; Raworth, 2017; Jakobsen, 2019) portrays the human nature as springing from selfishly maximizing our own utility. Ecological economist Tim Jackson argues in line with multiple economic anthropologists like Karl Polanyi (Polanyi, 2001); that by changing the economic system we don't change human nature; rather we facilitate it by recognizing the depth and breadth of the human soul (Jackson, 2017): By challenging the dogma that our

desires are insatiable, and to contrarily suggest that we become happier by sharing with others (in lines of degrowth) rather than confining as much as possible to ourself, then the very foundation of prevailing economic theory and ideology is challenged.

To shortly summarise this section and return to the answer of the Labour party representative, postulating that a long-lasting system should play along with human nature, has in other words connotations heavily impacted by certain prevailing older economic theories. As we have seen earlier with APs overall emphasise of the importance of 'business as usual' and optimistic belief in technological innovations and solutions ranging from electrification to CCS, they can be regarded as good representatives, and characterised by, the ecomodernist discourse.

Further statements on degrowth

As for the Liberal party, the informant emphasised the importance of growth within certain sectors of the economy to ensure a viable green transformation, and a circular economy. He made a point out of not technically being sure whether it's possible to have economic growth in total (referring to GDP) whilst achieving all the goals necessary. However, he prefaced that is absolutely needs to take place within a market economy, as well as a high scepticism to degrowth 'as an ideology':

“So the degrowth movement for me is more about where we should choose, to reduce consumption (...). But having it more as an ideological approach I have less faith in.” (V)

I wasn't sure what to expect from the Green party as they politically are centred and open to cooperate with anyone to minimise the harm on nature and climate. When questioned about degrowth, I was told that:

*“As we already are an academic party de lux, the biggest discussion [on degrowth] that I have had now in recent years is how we show **concrete examples of a nice economy** to live in, **rather than** having the **conceptual discussion** or an economic theory discussion that very few can participate in.” (MDG)*

So being asked what their relation to degrowth is and what it means to them, The Green party was two-sided. On the one hand, she prefaced that it first and foremost is an academic or theoretical term that she refrains from using herself. Additionally, she emphasised that the party because of their already established 'academic appeal'. On the other hand, the practical meaning of 'degrowth' to her is about adapting consumerism and production to nature's

tolerance limits, or the planetary boundaries, which co-aligns with how she argues that her party demand that politics needs to be designed: within the frameworks of nature.

The Green politician also made the remark that the party internally have established that there are voters within the green movement that doesn't desire degrowth, without further explaining or going in depth on this. Yet, she emphasised a suspicion that by drilling down in the specifics, rather than the various use of concepts which she prefaced might drift us apart from each other and lead to misinterpretation, we are quite in agreement across the board...

As for the Red party, the informant underscored that she hasn't read that much theory about the term itself, yet her arguments and overall take on degrowth could remind of a degrowth advocate:

*“Degrowth is putting nature, the planet, and people at the centre, because the eternal pursuit of growth in our economy today comes at the expense of human resources and nature/climate. So, **overcoming the eternal growth mindset will lead to putting people and nature more in the centre.**” (R)*

Regardless of her clear speech on this, it is interesting to notice that the party, as to my research, hasn't utilized the term itself in any means of communication. Though it should be noted that the substance of meaning very much is there in their arguments, as R's overall political voice has been referred to as functioning like a 'guard dog', ensuring that critique of economic growth imperatives.

My informant representing SV was new in the job, and unfortunately wasn't very acquainted with their stances on overall politics economically and made the point that these topics are often separated. When I asked her about degrowth, her answer was that she hadn't been working with this thematic and pointed to that the party doesn't use the term in any way. As the Socialistic Left is a party that promotes a stronger, more progressive, taxation than many others, with an overall focus on just environmental politics, one could assume their policy proposals aren't 'too off' from similarly premised degrowth ones. She did shine light on that they are positive to 6 hours working days with a salary compensation and emphasized that they have an ambitious overall climate and environmental politics and have suggested a statutory right to repair when asked about consumption.

The different views on degrowth

RQ2: How do views on degrowth differ between political, environmental, and selected academic actors in Norway?

Economic growth – a (sociopolitical) democratic matter?

Summary

An interesting observation during this research was just how differently degrowth promoters talk about it compared to i.e. typical politicians, as the framing was fundamentally different. Whereas one representing one of the larger parties (AP, SP, V) degrowth is associated with negative regulations and lack of abundance, meanwhile advocates focus is on the abundance found through the means of frugality. Additionally on the active stance from citizens by more democracy, further social and equitable based policies, sharing of the commons, etc. opposed to how politicians present it as diminished personal freedom, with a sense of loss.

Overall, politicians typically perceive degrowth as being somewhat utopian neither practically feasible nor necessarily urgent. NGO's view degrowth policies as necessary, especially in a North-South perspective to make ecological space as seen with Martinez-Aliér, but as inheriting a limited force in making the change by impacting politicians. Academics view degrowth as viable and urgent paths of alternative thinking, important to pave the way for to ensure different possible futures. To summarise, where environmental and academics argue for the fruitfulness of the shift in focus and all the possibilities that come with degrowth: moving away from the quantitative governmentality used to measure productivity, efficiency and capital, politicians focus on the negative aspects of regulation, narrowing personal freedom, losing popularity and ultimately voters.

Elaborative discussion

Where the spokesperson from SP stated that he doesn't feel like the question of economic growth characterises any debate, SV made the remark that:

*“Discussions on this [growth] very often becomes either **purely economic or sociopolitical**, and **rarely bridges are built between.**” (SV)*

The statements of SP and SV underpin each other. As economic growth stands untampered with as a premise to plan accordingly to, simply being asked about the benefits of *degrowth* can

to many politicians sound out of touch with reality, and a lot like recession. Nonetheless, as phrased by degrowth advocate Hickel: “a recession is what happens when a growth-dependent economy stops growing: it’s a disaster. Degrowth is completely different. It is about shifting to a different kind of economy altogether – an economy that doesn’t *need* growth in the first place.” (Hickel, 2022a, 206) This is a central and important point of clarification for degrowth, as it all together shifts focus away from perpetual growth.

An important point to preface is that in Norwegian, the green transition is called “the green shift” (NO: det grønne skiftet). A linguistic matter on this topic is that in English one can differentiate between a ‘transition’ meaning a shorter period of change, and a ‘transformation’ implying a marked or noticeable change in form. The Norwegian phrase can possibly significate a transformation as well as a transition and can therefore be misleading as to how much is to change. Noticeably, the phrase in Norwegian has in practice solemnly been used on measurements of technological innovations of green technologies, and typical ecomodernist takes, and in this regard been co-opted by the ecomodernist discourse.

MDG underscored the problems of having to always work up against the premise of economic growth, stating that:

*“It would have been nice if **economic growth** hadn't **been the designated trump-card** that you can use, (...): we have to remove this default logic and trump-card.” (MDG)*

Furthermore, this also became clear is a fundamental issue for political work, as environmental governance isn’t a premise to be taken for granted, but rather something one needs to fight to ensure will be in place. This was prefaced by the parties R, SV, MDG and V. MDG also emphasised a central myth and misunderstanding in peoples' overall added value to the importance of economic growth:

*“(...) the myths in the Norwegian public also rather works a bit like an iron fist: that **is the myth that economic growth is absolutely crucial for Norwegian prosperity**” (MDG)*

An interesting observation was that all the environmental movement informants underscored and problematised the prevailing discourse around development as being unilinear (FIVH, WWF, NV, Spire), being one of degrowth’s bigger societal critiques, keeping in mind the standing discourse of parties like AP which operate after the catch phrase “develop, not liquidate” as touched upon earlier (page 47), underpinning the importance of going about with *business as usual*. As economic interests and incentives are as prominent and implicitly there as

they are, the party MDG underscored that they feel like they never get to come in a position where they can be offensive, as they typically are forced to be defensive about so many basic environmental governance topics. V and SV similarly problematised how they need to get into a negotiating position to get things done, which in the case for nature conservation optimally would be the institutionalised premise, but currently isn't. These points are important because they show how some core premises of economic growth impact the overall constructivist dynamics otherwise.

Not surprisingly, all the environmental organisations were acquainted with degrowth. It happens that the disciplinary background of all these informants working in NGOs were ranging from international relations, development studies and political science, all of them being social scientists, having insights in geopolitical money flows, North-South dichotomies, social injustice, and how these relate to climate change. One could hypothesise that the likelihood of someone knowing about and being somewhat positive to degrowth (or agnostic to growth) increases significantly having this knowledge background and working with dissemination of information of this sort, which I will return in the third section of the discussion.

The omnipotent presence of economic incentives

Norwegians typically, and foreigners particularly, assess Norway to be a well-functioning social democracy - for some foreigners it presents itself even socialist. It was striking that all the academic informants problematised the regressive developments of classical social(ist) structures within Norway due to neoliberal policies and New Public Management since the 80s:

*“[there has been] a drastic change in the Norwegian form of society that we can ‘think of’ as socialist: **the reduction of community building, collective areas, trade unions, but not least the prevailing economism** (economic prudence that takes precedence in all types of institutions, at the university, health sector and health enterprises,) on area after area, liberalisation processes that stand in contrast to what we call socialist.” (A4)*

Similar reflections around how social-, and community-based principles have been phased out because of quantitative target management in the names of new public management and neoliberalism was problematised by multiple academics (A1, A3, A4, A5). Notably, more social policies and community-based suggestions are core arguments from the degrowth movement, and a desired societal development seen from the academics' stance as they consider bringing

social policies back in focus, managing by qualitative means rather than quantitative, crucial for overall societal development and socio-ecological well-being.

To further draw on the presence of economic incentives in democratic decisions, MDG problematised *the tripartite system* in our interview; a system in Norway that was put in motion around a hundred years ago, being a cooperation between industry, employers, and workers (Thomassen, 2023). The tripartite cooperation played an important role in the social democratic idea to gather various societal interests at one table to facilitate for the best common outcome, diplomatically and democratically. MDG prefaced that this historically constellated a reformative and huge re-organisation of and in society, paving the way for workers' rights, etc. Today however, a standing issue is how prevalent economic interests are at the table. This was also underscored by one of my academic informants, which emphasised: "If one is to have it as a body that represents a democratic way of thinking, then more ways of thinking need to come in to be more representative" (A5).

To illustrate the problem here more specifically, Norwegian organisations like Bellona and Zero are for an instance represented at the tripartite table (Hammer, 2016, 186), together with LO (the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions) and NHO (Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise), which to various extents also inhibit economic motives because of the high amount of workers in the petroleum sector (Holtvedt, 2021). This is highly relevant point, as so many of us put our trust in democratic processes like these, while economic incentives and interests are represented and present at the table where decisions for environmental governance and possible future scenarios are made. As put by MDG:

*"We are missing some voices around that table: we are missing nature, we are missing indigenous peoples, we are missing ordinary people [...]. **All of these are very real interests in a society that [the] tripartite co-operation does not represent...**" (MDG)*

To draw on the problem that nature isn't institutionalised and accounted for, WWF problematised that all incentives currently are concentrated around profit seeking and maximising.

*"**All the [contemporary] incentives go to maximise profit** - we just can't hide that - changing these incentives in the current system because politics is dependent on economics and finance [is crucial]" (WWF)*

In the lines of ecological economics acknowledgement of our need to operate within planetary boundaries and acknowledge biophysical limits, WWFs aim, according to my informant, is for

politicians to use ecological footprints as a dashboard to operate according to. That way the political apparatus will navigate accordingly to ecological and planetary boundaries, and not the opposite way around. After having collected perspectives on these matters from so many interest groups and individuals, I think it is reasonable to refer to one of the academic quotes and point about the underestimation of social sciences (page 40): the logical assumption and belief that once the natural scientific data is present, things will change and politicians actions too is noticeably what WWF is stating. Worthy of mentioning, many of my political and environmental informants (V, MDG, SV, N, Spire, FIVH, WWF) raised worries of political measurements of fees, taxes, etc. not necessarily being sufficient for the pervasive changes necessary. They all enhanced the importance of setting absolute, rather than relative goals, and either in-, or directly hoped for absolute decoupling not wanting to settle with continuing with a relative one.

Just a transition?

As clearly demonstrated in the mail from the Conservative party (H), (at page 54) stating how the green transition presents itself as something of a business opportunity, this attitude has by many been argued is an offspring of the widely used terminology *sustainable development*, allowing a 'win-win narrative' (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2017). This take ultimately doesn't require anyone to change their ways in any fundamental manner, nor to abandon positions of privilege (Vetlesen, 2024, 16). The incentives coming forth by H here manifest a belief that we can save the planet and make money meanwhile, as pinpointed by my academic informant, A7:

*"(...) In Norway [compared to Southern European countries] there is, this very foundation of thinking and attitude, that is, to put it bluntly: **people should save the world and get rich at the same time**" (A7)*

As I was just referring to a premise of one of Norway's biggest and most popular political parties', the Conservatives' worldly presentation of 'det grønne skiftet', the green transition, like a sort of business deal, the currently operating green growth model makes one question multiple scales of this... That being said, academics see through this scheme:

*"I think **green growth is a nice tool for preserving and upholding various strong political and economic structures that are serving elites** in various countries very well... it is turning nature and environmental policy into financial assets, and what we are seeing now both in the*

carbon market, is that in the name of green growth: neoliberal tools are getting more and more extreme...” (A7)

A classical way of opinion holders of various backgrounds across ideological spectrums, uniting for climate and social motivated action, is through the formulation and agreement of that we need ‘a socially just transition’. Rather than this, it looks as if the trends we are seeing are more of a ‘just a social transition’. What I mean by this is that as illustrated with the arguments put out from various actors, the changes put in order are incremental in comparison to what they ought to, and they don’t give the impression of having transformative social impacts neither, where people activate and motivate themselves as change agents - quite the contrary. Certain intellectuals are problematising this referring to it either as *a reflexive impotence* (Fisher, 2009, 53) or as action-paralysing (Latour & Schultz, 2022, 18): knowing there are many alternatives, but emotionally experiencing how bad different predicaments we are facing are and the overall too slow pace of transformational implementation of changes, become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Socio-ecological change

Another difference in how certain political actors (especially AP, V, SP) on the one hand problematises the economic aspects of changing systems, with environmental organisations and academics on the other, is the framing in terms of social and ecological changes – or put differently as just touched upon, *transformations*. As formulated by one of the academics on why degrowth is important, her answer was clear:

*“[it is] not only in rich countries to reduce consumption and production, but it **a total project for a social-ecological transformation**, a radical change of society that is also about our lives, our communities and well-being. So, in addition to a more solidarity-based economy, within the country but also at a global level” (A2)*

The focus of politicians was also rarely placed on people’s longing for purpose and meaning, our need for community and contribution, the fruitfulness of more active democracy. This was especially a scope of focus from the academic’s side, emphasizing the importance of re-politicizing discussions on how much time we spend working, reclaiming common goods and everyday necessities like public transport, and more. The argument appealing to the Global Norths moral duty globally to grow less economically, as it comes at the expenses of others in the global South, was argued by all the environmental organisations and academics, as well as explicitly by the political party R, while indicated by others.

Framing and perspective

At NRK (Norway's national news channel) a recent tv series investigated how serious the nature crisis has become in Norway. In a summary, the host concluded that we need more 'no-people' in power positions (NRK, 2024), meaning those that aren't afraid of setting boundaries, referring to the importance of authorities recognising limits and thresholds through ecological/planetary boundaries. As widely acknowledge biologist, Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson points out, this ultimately is a question of framing - as she puts it:

"I would like to twist it: Because a NO to the demolition of a natural area is also a YES to so many other things." (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2024)

This is an excellent comment on degrowth as well, as how we interpret degrowth ultimately condenses down to be a matter of perspective. Do we orient our attention to the positive aspects of what we potentially can achieve and win – or lose. My academic informants, in which all have somewhat of a transdisciplinary background, kept prefacing how competition is everywhere in society and how this might serve the market, but not our relationships with ourselves nor others. The same was prefaced on reflections around maximisation of utility.

*"A holistic orientation to one where it is **no longer about maximising things**, but to orient ourselves to that life should be good without us maximising all the time. And that must be what a green governmentality would be all about..." (A5)*

Like I previously showed to in the academic interviews regarding the green transformation taking place in Norway, all the academics were discontent with the changes implemented, pointing to them being techno-scientific fixings or *symptomatic treatments* (Beck, 1992), where the deeper root causes aren't being addressed to make about an integrative and holistic change. In the ways just demonstrated, degrowth promotes so-called "no-people", saying yes to what the market doesn't account for, the qualitative qualities not being quantitatively accounted for.

Short summary: In this section I problematised the omnipresence of economic incentives, also in democratic manners, and how socially focused policies since the neoliberal trend has had a regressive development, that academics in particular desire to get back, in the same way as they desire a more qualitatively managed society. Then I have demonstrated how many prevailing discourses are funded on business as usual and the continuation of 'sustainable

development' is in the overall Norwegian context, manifesting how economic growth remains the default logic. I demonstrated how transition and transformation make up two distinctly different concepts and phenomena and showed how those of my informants who are seeking for change desire a deeper one than a simple transition.

RQ3: What potentials and barriers for degrowth are identified by environmental and academic actors in the Norwegian context?

RQ3: Potentials and hindrances

First, I will clarify what is withholding these two societal actor groups of addressing degrowth to a bigger extent, and then I will move on to their identified potential and barriers.

Environmental organisations

The results from the interviews conducted with different actors from environmental organisations pointed to 'fear' as a major barrier for degrowth to be considered as a serious and plausible pathway; indeed, all the interviewed environmental organisations "confessed" that even though they are either currently having, or previously had, post-growth debates internally, they are not all that optimistic towards using the term outwardly, which allegedly would risk for them to belong to an specific 'sphere', losing credibility and professionalism leading to not being taken seriously by politicians.

Nor FIVH, Naturvernforbundet or WWF use the term "degrowth" in their communications. Spire was the only outspoken NGO advocating for degrowth specifically. By pointing out the various meanings of the concept and critically assessing the validity of the typical arguments of unilinear development and material prosperity through welfare, they used the degrowth term.

It is noteworthy that FIVH, having such a degrowth-based theoretical background, lacks any mention of the term. My informant explained that what matters the most to them is *how* things can be done differently, rather than labelling it 'as something', as labelling easily can place them 'in a box'. To avoid this, she claimed it to be pragmatic to maintain their political independence to influence both left and right sides of politics. To paraphrase the FIVH representative, they prioritise having doors and ears open, rather than risking alienating certain politicians that are "allergic" to, as she formulated, "that kind of thing" (FIVH).

The counsellor from Naturvernforbundet pointed out that people within the organisation - typically ecologists working for environmental governance and not geopolitical sociocultural phenomena - are *already* being perceived as “utopians in need of a reality orientation” (N). All the environmental organisations argued in line with degrowth scholars on the three main policy proposals, shown in table 1 (page 36) on the importance of making ‘ecological space’ for the South to economically grow to a just level, Norway’s responsibility in showing the way – phasing out oil and gas and utilizing our oil fund money in a just ways for socially just transitions... N also prefaced that they did a series of discussions available to their members some years back, where the overarching topic was economic growth.

These opinions illustrate how one of the big barriers for a paradigm shift that considers degrowth as a plausible pathway, is the fear that organisations (but also others) have of being perceived as "too radical" or "dreamers". With a fear of losing credibility and possibilities of influence, they refrain from addressing it. It is interesting to note that constructive and critical voices against the reigning growth paradigm seem to remain within certain walls, taking place inside with “other idealists”, at a sound distance from judgements about ‘professionality’.

Academics

Academic hierarchy can be useful to interpret my results from interviews with academics and their instance of degrowth, which addresses the question of the barriers for degrowth seeing from their perspective.

During this research, I observed that the most outspoken advocates for degrowth within academia (both the ones that I formally interviewed, but also of the ones I discussed with informally as part of the triangulation process before formally writing the thesis) seem to have in common that they have reached a certain level of respect and credibility within their academic field and consider themselves to be social and/or transdisciplinary scientists. All, except one, of the most outspoken advocates were Professors, in which one made the remark that “You have a duty as a permanent employee at the university to take on a role that criticises the existing order” (A4). Furthermore, the advocates didn’t express any concern about being perceived as unscientific, radical, political, ideological and the like. By inhabiting a high position in academia with a safe working position, they don’t “risk anything” in contrast to their peers with lower hierarchical positions in academia and elsewhere, who might lose their credibility, by also working a lot with fields like that of economics in particular.

As one could wonder whether explicit advocacy of degrowth to be a matter of age where young ones are more in favour, as seen with the only youth organisation of the NGOs, I had some academic informants disproving this hypothesis. One is retired and in a very “inapproachable place” as also inhibiting the Professor position (A3), meaning they won’t risk their work necessarily by addressing degrowth - but he still preferred not to use term about himself explicitly, as it bears negative and ambiguous connotations. He fears these might lead him astray and to not being listened to as he should, as the serious scientific actor he is. Some of the academics that I interviewed are with-holding their personal views on the fruitfulness and importance of de/postgrowth, afraid of being perceived either as not *serious scientific actors*, politically very left-winged, or to be associated with anarchistic and utopian “dreamers”, alike the remark of Naturvernforbundet (see page 72).

Worthy of mentioning, a friend of mine that is an ecological economist (person X), told me outside of these formalised interviews that X doesn’t want to be affiliated with the degrowth movement as it closes many doors within the world of economics. As degrowth is still very much misunderstood ‘out there’, it is risky to be affiliated with it. X stated that once the community of economics have realised how sound what the degrowth movement promotes, and gets bigger support, then X would be an outspoken advocate as well. Until then, affiliation is a risky endeavour to begin X’s career.

To summarise, the overall pattern I have seen is that those that are outspoken degrowth advocates in academia typically embrace social science, transdisciplinary and *value rationality* (as earlier clarified in the theory section of phronetic research, (page 14) not fearing postulating normative assessments based on scientific insights. But it should be noted that they also might primarily work with dissemination work to other transdisciplinary social scientists. The ones more restrained in addressing skepsis towards the reigning growth paradigm, or simply promote de/postgrowth, work with and/or within disciplines more concerned with specific models etc. within frameworks, like economics, not addressing the frameworks per se. Important to note, is that regardless of that all of the academics did not proclaim themselves to be a “degrowther”, all the academic informants shared the commonality of working towards a socially just postgrowth future, but using different means.

Credibility and professionalism

So, even though ongoing discussions around the growth paradigm and the many problems interrelated are taking place internally in all the environmental NGOs interviewed (WWF, NV, Spire, FIVH), they fear that they will not be taken seriously by political actors, which potentially could have devastating impacts on their political influence to do their overall work. It was an interesting observation that all the environmental movement informants underscored and problematised the prevailing ecomodernist discourse around development being unilinear, and so many of the degrowth discourse points of critique. In other words, a clear barrier or obstacle presenting itself is the overall fear of academic and environmental actors daring to advocate for de/postgrowth as they are afraid of losing credibility or professionalism, being perceived as 'utopian' or unrealistic idealists, namely by politicians which possess power of implementing change. This argument of political pragmatism stands for all, except Spire. For the environmental organisations, this fear could also be the case if they fear losing (paying) members which they economically are depending on, however, none of them prefaced this specifically.

Like I have argued and discussed by now, Norway and contemporary times in the Global North are much characterised by the ecomodernist discourse, in terms of looking to technological solutions (green energy, electrification, etc.) to societal problems, being oriented towards maximising efficiency of resource utilisation and sustainability intensification (Ara Begum et al, 2022, 173). To answer what the identified barriers are for degrowth implementation and bigger advocacy at large from academics and environmental organisations, it should be noted that as ecomodernism and degrowth stand in a fractious relation to each other itself can be a form of an obstacle. As I asked the academics about their reflection on the green transition, this point frequently presented itself. That the green transition in Norway to a big extent is driven forward by technological innovations, like i.e. people's everyday life by Norway being the country in the world with the highest number of electric vehicles per capita for an instance, might again impact our perceptions and could be fuelling our trust in technology. But as prefaced by one of the academics,

"I think that things are moving far too slowly in Norway, and that the measures we are discussing are largely centred on preserving the system we have. The system-preserving rhetoric of the green transformation also includes the belief that technology will develop to solve many of the problems (in some miraculous way), [and] that we have very little real system-critical debate in Norway." (A7)

That the ecomodernist discourse in combination with our history of advocating for ‘sustainable development’ and our current focus on green growth, can have the effect that actors in general, also being private ones, feel more restrained to speak and advocate for critical thinking relating to de/postgrowth, as the Norwegian context per se make the threshold quite low to be radically different in comparison to other to elsewhere. This again could arguably make system-critical debates less probable to take place and get support. This is at least a scare. The systemic debates of redistribution, justice and consumerism that degrowth fronts and seeks to inspire to ensure happening, were prevalent in Norway back in the 70s. Then FIVH raised as a critical voice towards the growth regime and environmental justice, alongside the philosophical *deep ecology* movement of Arne Næss, which noteworthy considered himself to be an optimist *for the twenty-second century* as he believed that in the twenty-first century, “we have to go through some very bad times and it will hurt even the rich countries. Now it is all sailing smoothly—but it will hurt the rich. So, I am a short-range pessimist, and a long-range optimist.” (Bockel, 1995, 10) But as pointed out, FIVH has moved into a more populist direction by seeking credibility to all ears on the political spectrum, with the youth organisation Spire standing out as one of the most outspoken system critical organisations.

Conviviality and participation in the welfare state

“Welfare is seen as being secured material security, but quality of life transcends that concept. (...) What is important is to create a viable society with dialogue-based relationships, and when we have a system/economy that is based on competing for solutions, that is part of the core of the problem” (A1)

Multiple academics emphasised that a critical part of the implementation of degrowth policies in Norway would be to address the welfare state in a proper manner: how can we reshape and maintain the well-functioning aspects of the welfare state, meanwhile enforcing some of the principles of degrowth with collective thought forms and further democratisation (A1, A2, A3), community and conviviality. The importance of **contribution** was prefaced by many (A1, A2, A3, A4, A7) in the overall argument for the importance of degrowth. One of the Professors has worked with dialogue projects around the country with 60 different municipalities in Norway to better understand what kind of development it is that the population desire to take place in their communities. He emphasised that one of their findings is that “We have to start satisfying needs – primarily with social activity with others and relationships with nature” (A1). After participating in such a comprehensive overview with people themselves addressing what they want, he

underscores the importance that we have influence on our local communities and our own lives. That, he emphasised, is a *shared experience*, and something that we commonly experience as meaningful. To further pinpoint the difference of welfare and well-being:

“It has yet to happen that anyone says they want increased material consumption: no one says that. But even so, it is what is on the political and economic agenda all the time. So, we must have a society that is a quality-of-life society, to build culture individually and collectively, make more intertwined culture with more activity and [for it] to become more participating and for the people not just to be a spectator...” (A1)

This participatory dialogue project, according to the Professor, was insightful in that people feel like they are becoming increasingly passivised, and less participating in their local societies. These problems and matters are coinciding a lot with the stories advocates focus on talking about degrowth: meaningful co-created participation. Instead of simply being a passive spectator (i.e. being granted money from the welfare state in exchange for work, as used by example of A2 & A5), people’s potential to contribute and not only their willingness to do so, but the purpose and meaning this brings to people in terms of conviviality and *bun vivir*, are the focus. A consistent argument for why degrowth is important from the academic’s side is also how sustainable this can be eco-socially speaking, by operating after the principle of ‘by each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’.

Other academic advocates for degrowth also to preface the importance of a more active democracy with people reclaiming power of local developments (A3, A5), as that most likely would lead to very different outcomes than when economic incentives currently at play.

Well-being and welfare

As well-being is an important point to clarify as it isn’t the same as welfare state and touches upon some core distinguished differences in how different actors perceive degrowth, I will briefly clarify this. Norwegians’ degree of happiness, or well-being, has almost stagnated since the 1990s, meanwhile consumerism has multiplied, which very well might be because of our overall high welfare, as addressed by statistician Ottar Hellevik (Hellevik, 2003). Hellevik studied well-being between 1985 and 2007 within Norway and questions whether prosperity has shaped us adversely, and explicitly addresses the need for governmental action to implement community-

oriented countermeasures to avoid economic growth stimulating a material value orientation (Hellevik, 2008, 263), thereby making a direct appeal to institutions to be aware of this.

Professor and leader for climate and energy transition at the University of Bergen, Håvard Haarstad, addresses that all but one Norwegian political party assess more economic growth to be of big importance, to be a matter of concern (Sandberg, 2023). Haarstad brings to attention that we are inside a discourse-spiral with the premise that we need *more*, meanwhile our whole economic system is built on producing more: “So we imagine that we need a higher standard of living, without having any concept of what a high enough standard of living would be.”

(Sandberg, 2023, translated self) This conception of welfare being the same as well-being, could be argued is closely interlinked with our misunderstanding and belief in the logical connotation of development as something unilinear, going from the worse increasingly towards the better.

Interestingly, political informants and academics (A2, A4, MDG, V), addressed that the welfare state might serve to be an obstacle for certain degrowth policy proposals (universal basic income and reduced working time) as it is a system that in many aspects clearly works well, but that also is funded on rights rather than duties hence passive individual reception rather than active collaborative participation, in terms of it being a framework people are romanticizing as so well-functioning.

In the newest report from the Climate committee, it is explicitly clarified that welfare and prosperity are two different things, “A country can have a high level of prosperity only for a few, but low overall well-being. For the development of society, it is of the greatest importance how well-being develops.” (NOU 2023:5, 121, translated self)

One could wonder whether one of the (many, I am by no means stating this as the main) reasons for general social neglects of degrowth related substance have to do with the underestimation of social science and humaniora at large. What I mean is that as degrowth has come to be considered belonging to the realm of social sciences, even though it very much springs out of ‘hard science’ insight and knowledge, it appears to deal more with theory than actual

Rounding off

Commonly amongst all the academic and environmental informants was an explicit scepticism to the overall functionality of green growth in the bigger schemes of things, because of the absence

of absolute decoupling, rebound-effects, cost-shifting, land use, etc., but also a lack of political will and economical instruments put out in practice. Like the informant from WWF emphasised, we have yet to see genuine green growth, so it remains an idea and isn't close to a practice. This was backed up by N and Spire stating our need for brave politicians that dare to implement necessary tools. N emphasised that politicians have opened more the last years to green prepositions of various kinds but prefaced how they still must be growth based somehow, which again doesn't really challenge any fundamental premise. But importantly, these practical aspects of scepticism weren't all, as N for an instance, made the point of worrying about that solely economic tools will not be enough. Or like formulated in a summarizing way by one of the ecological economists,

*«If the green transition is motivated by economic reasons, it won't be a green transition, it has to be justified by some ethical issues on the ground. I think **the green transition** is positive in the sense that **it helps certain symptoms**, but it doesn't help in the system shift: it doesn't create anything new or reform.» (A1)*

As humans we are social beings hardwired for storytelling and community. With the majority feeling alienated by current unjust socio-economic mechanisms and arguably to a growing extent with nationalism and protectionism on the rise. Perhaps people crave new discourses for reclaiming their agencies to determine the outcome of societal planning and practices. One in which they hold power holders accountable, and partake in the shaping of, rather than simply passively accepting the given story of 'human nature' to later transfer the same framework onwards. We need new ideas because we need new relationships: to ourselves, to each other, and to nature. As degrowth encourages purposeful pro-active collaboration, participation and justice, it could very well develop to be perceived as less 'radical' in the years ahead.

6. Conclusion

A key ingredient for making substantial societal changes is to change our imaginaries. It is well known that substantial societal change is needed to address the compounding crises that face our world today. We rely largely on environmental organisations, academics, and politicians to lead the way in doing this. Yet, this research has shown that many of the actors tasked with these responsibilities, don't feel like they can speak out about degrowth as it is considered too radical. A clear barrier presenting itself is the overall fear and restraint to advocate for and constructively address degrowth, as people are afraid of losing credibility or by being perceived as utopian or unrealistic idealists.

Throughout this paper I have demonstrated how deeply entrenched the discourse of 'sustainable development' is forwarded by omnipresent economic interests and a sociocultural context that is characterised by ecomodernist thought with re-enforced technological optimism. I have indicated possible reasons why the degrowth discourse isn't being as addressed as it arguably should. Firstly, by the overall Norwegian discourse situated and largely characterised by a green growth based look on the overall societal changes that needs to be done, having the main focus on 'the green transition', rather than any socio-ecologic transformation. Secondly, as have been underscored by my political informants, discussions revolving around economic growth have a tendency of either being explicitly political or economic. As degrowth seeks to politicise the economy by democratising it: opening for addressing why and on what terms we draw conclusions, overcoming this established default logic currently appears difficult, as the topic altogether is rarely addressed.

With Norway's praise of ecomodernist principles, i.e. resource efficiency, green technologies, and renewable energy, the degrowth (explicit) discourse remains incremental, as shown through interviews with academics, politicians, and NGOs. This is the case because of an overall fear from various actor groups of ideological affiliations, possible misinterpretations, and neglected credibility. This is an interesting dynamic as there appears to be some reinforcing discourses at play that very few of us are actively taking a stance to ourselves. Even though the explicit degrowth discourse doesn't appear to be big; that being the outspoke use of the term which on the contrary is rather incremental; the spirit and desire of wanting alternative thinking and long-term sustainable societal organisation is very much there, as seen through academics and environmental organisations. In the name of political pragmatism most actors deliberately chose to stay away from the topic all together. This is problematic, as a key ingredient to changing society, is to be able to imagine new realities.

Further studies

The experiences of this project taught me just how tabu decoupling remains in the political sphere, and as the field of anthropology usually makes a point of, tabus are there to be studied. Further study of politicians' takes on decoupling and how their politics currently are and ideally should revolve around this would be interesting. As the welfare state often was pointed to as a possible obstacle to lift degrowth policies both by politicians and academics, a study looking into which ways a welfare state can serve to be possible obstacles and/or openers for

transformational changes could be interesting. I also believe it could be interesting to compare the youth parties' stances on degrowth policies compared with the ruling ones, as the youth parties tend to have a more critical stance on the necessity of economic growth. Comparing municipalities own desires for development to higher political instances could be interesting to investigate how the various nuances of radicality both internally in political parties, but also on a national power scale from municipalities, provinces, and up to the parliament (Storting) plays out differently. Additionally, my informants brought attention to the importance of further investigating the economic interests present in the tripartite collaboration – this, or similar social democratic processes could be fruitful to investigate to expose economic interests at play.

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Appendix

Interview guide for political informants

1. How does your political party relate to planetary boundaries?
2. What barriers do you experience that make it politically challenging to be proactive?
3. Is economic growth a prerequisite for solving the crises and problems that we are facing?
4. Are you familiar with degrowth: what does your party consider the benefits of a social model based on growth-free development?
5. How should Norway, as one of the richest countries in the world, 'lead the way' in environmental and social policy?
6. How does your party relate to the following:
 - a. *Shorter working days/reduced working time?*
 - b. *Less consumption?*
 - c. *Prohibit planned obsolescence and make repair of products more available?*
 - d. *To set maximum salaries or caps on how much one can earn?*
 - e. *Universal basic income?*

Interview guide for environmental organisations

1. How is your organisation working with Norway's way of operating within planetary boundaries?
2. Do you deem economic growth be a prerequisite to solve the various crisis that we are facing?
3. How should Norway, as one of the richest countries in the world, 'lead the way' in environmental and social policy?
4. Are you acquainted with degrowth? If so, what does it mean to you?
5. What would the benefits of a more growth free societal development be?

Interview guide for academics

1. What are your reflections around the measures of 'the green transition' [det grønne skiftet] in Norway?
2. Can the welfare state serve to be an obstacle rather than an 'opener' for degrowth propositions to be taken seriously/implemented?
 - a. What do you assess to be the obstacles for degrowth suggestions to come at place in Norway?
 - b. The green growth paradigm: do you consider it to be an obstacle or an opener – how?

3. Why is degrowth important?
4. Which concrete degrowth-inspired proposals would you rather see implemented in a Norwegian context?
5. What kind of responsibility does Norway have to embrace degrowth-inspired policies internationally?



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