Organizing for degrowth

Beyond the business of business

Degrowth provides a broad vision for the much-needed transformation of modern economy and society. Businesses have so far been largely exempt from that vision, however. While they must not be ignored, what could be the role of businesses and how would they need to change?
By Dirk Raith

1 Introduction

Degrowth has been around as an issue for more than a decade now [1]. Over the years, from the *post-2007* to the *Covid-19* crisis, it has become the watchword of a global movement – one that, apart from different disciplinary origins (ranging from *ecological economy* to *political ecology*) and national traditions (including the French *décroissance* and German *Postwachstum*) has also claimed to integrate other topical issues and movements, such as *Transition*, *Commons*, feminist economics, the E*conomy for the Common Good*, *Buen Vivir*, or the *Foundational Economy*, to name but some of the most prominent ones today. Indeed, in that context, it has been suggested to understand *degrowth* as "a slogan that mobilizes, brings together, and gives meaning to a diverse range of people and movements without being their only, or even principal, horizon. It is a network of ideas, a vocabulary […] that more and more people feel speaks to their concerns" (Kallis 2017, 30; cf. also D'Alisa et al. 2015, xxi).

Degrowth indeed draws from these other people and movements, it extends way beyond a mere critique of economic growth and offers a broad economic, political, social, and cultural vision instead – so the claim sounds reasonably justified. There's one thing, however, that's prominently missing from that "vocabulary for a new era" (cf. ibid.): *the businesses*. Not only is there no entry on them, in this "definitive international reference" (ibid., p. i) – they are practically not mentioned at all. The same holds true for two other anthologies on the issue (Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik 2015; Le Monde diplomatique 2015) as well as for the latest efforts to provide a "systematic introduction" to the field (Schmelzer and Vetter 2019) or make a "case for degrowth" (Kallis et al. 2020).

In this article, I would like to put the finger on exactly this blind spot. I argue that businesses have too long been falsely neglected, as agents of sustainable degrowth. Based on a meta-analysis that also includes neighboring fields I show that the little research there is on the issue applies different notions of "business de/growth", promoting either "good growth" or "beautiful smallness". I propose a synthetic perspective instead that integrates these two paradigms with the more radical degrowth preference for non-market actors. I conclude that businesses, in order to be part of the solution, need to become active "game-changers", beyond carving out sustainable niches. "Organizing for degrowth" therefore calls for cooperation beyond "the economy", and for a new political role of business, in terms of economic democracy and a republican co-responsibility for good rules.

2 Debunking the "growth myth"

In the debates and research on degrowth, businesses have so far been mostly neglected. That's not really an original observation. It is as old as the debate itself, but still valid today. So, likely the first study on the issue was based on the premise that "[i]n this reflection on the economy of degrowth, there's one important thing that's missing: business" (Christophe 2007, 14 – own translation). Some of the latest contributions do state likewise that "so far business has been mostly overlooked in discussions on degrowth" (Khmara and Kronenberg 2018, 722), "little has been said about the function of business in the transition to and dynamic reproduction of degrowth" (Wells 2018, 1 f.) and that "companies are largely blocked out by the corresponding societal and academic discourses" (Gebauer 2018, 231).

These same authors do also criticize that, if the level of organizations is addressed at all, this is usually "reduced to relatively marginal activities, such as back-to-landers, co-operatives, urban gardens, community agriculture, community currencies, barter markets, work-sharing, ethical banks, and community land trusts" (Khmara and Kronenberg, 2018, 722; cf. similarly Gebauer 2018, 231). In a nutshell: "[M]uch is made of forms other than 'normal' business" (Wells 2018, 2).

Certainly, this focus – and the ignorance of "normal" business that comes with it – has worthy theoretical reasons. Degrowth, particularly in its more radical fashion, regards itself as a negation of the politico-economic *status quo*, as it were: "Degrowth theorists call for an 'exit from the economy', an invitation to abandon economistic thinking and construct viable alternatives to capitalism" (Kallis 2017, 20; earlier Fournier 2008; Latouche 2011, 114 f.). While transition within this system, then, can only be top-down, bottom-up transition can only take place at and from the outside – through various, preferably non-mon-

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etary forms of grassroots "nowtopias". As a consequence, businesses are usually seen as part of the problem or reduced to a passive, adaptive role within a political and cultural transformation that's supposed to happen above and below them, on the level of system and individual. This view, however, reveals an awkward misalliance between degrowth and economic orthodoxy.

Indeed, the neglect of business when it comes to degrowth somehow recalls "the conventional wisdom that businesses must grow or die" (Burlingham 2016, xvii). It was this very "wisdom" that early students of small, non-growing businesses set out to dismantle (cf. ibid., Morris et al. 2006). It seems that degrowth, unwittingly, has somehow bought into that "growth myth" with respect to businesses. Certainly, it would be naive to ignore the systemic forces and drivers towards "endless compound growth" of and within a capitalist economy, including capital accumulation, interest, debt, competition, and private interests (cf. Harvey 2015, 222 ff.; Lange 2013), apart from all the political reasons and motives for growth in "democratic capitalism" (cf. Streeck 2013), under the aegis of Keynesian macroeconomics and the *GDP* (cf. Speich Chassé 2013). It would be equally naive to believe that the solution to this growth complex would come from businesses alone. Yet, it would also be naive to think that the degrowth transition could work without businesses – and false to think that it should, for several different reasons.

First of all, not all businesses are big or growing – indeed, the very opposite is true. The overwhelming majority of businesses is actually very small and doesn't grow, in terms of sales volume, number of employees, market share or material output. In the *EU-28*, according to recent *Eurostat* data on the "number of enterprises in the non-financial business economy by size class of employment", 93 % of all businesses in 2017 did count less than 10 employees, 99 % less than 50, and only 0.2 % were big companies with 250 and more employees – and this distribution has remained exactly the same for at least the last five years.

Compound economic growth, obviously, does not mean business growth, but rather *growth in the number of businesses* of all sizes. Similarly, recent interpretive case studies and representative surveys for Germany have shown that only 2 % of businesses were actually "growth-driven" (Gebauer et al. 2015, 4 – own translation) and that, "[i]n practice, there are obviously many businesses that, although (or because?) they do not want to grow, are quite successful" (Zahrnt and Seidl 2015, 2 – own translation).

This simple fact seems hard to swallow, both for mainstream management studies and its critics. Maybe this has to do with a more fundamental, conceptual prejudice that the statistics could help to repeal: "Capitalist business" in its ideal typical meaning, i. e. a business that's obsessed with profits and growth, is just not the general rule. Certainly, these businesses (i. e. "corporations") do exist, and they are indeed mostly big, profit- and growth-driven – and therefore part of the problem. Most companies, however, still do not follow that "formalist" textbook understanding of economic rationality. Rather, they elude or actually *reverse* it, in a more or less "substantivist" fashion (cf. Polanyi 2001), i. e. profit-making is not their primary goal, but a means to other ends, such as providing goods and services, being good in something else, or earning a decent living. Apart from these "traditionalist" businesses, there's also a fast-growing new generation of "post-capitalist" businesses that consciously wish to *reverse* capitalist economic rationality to reach "social" or "sustainability" goals, as a result. Degrowth hasn't really taken notice of that phenomenon either – even though they could help pave the way for an effective "escape from the economy" as we know it.

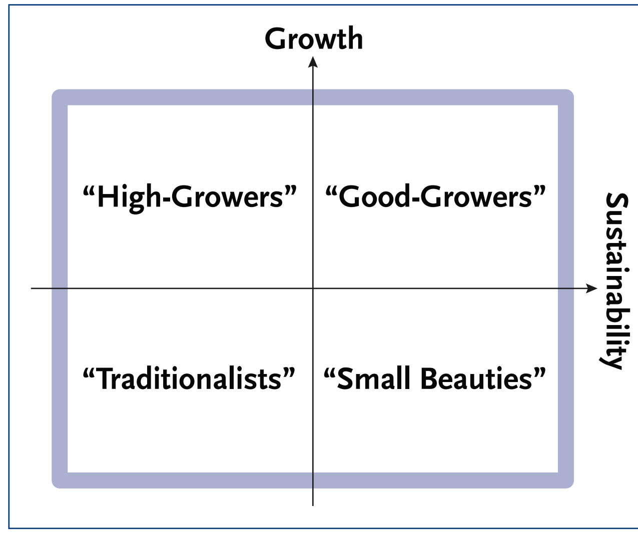

Figure 1: Heuristic 2 × 2 matrix of businesses according to their takes on growth & sustainability

3 Two strands of research: Between "good-growers" and "small beauties"

Research on businesses and degrowth is still hard to find, not least owing to the "growth myth" that I just identified. Not surprisingly, there's not even a common term that's used for the phenomenon at stake. It has been called many different names. While neither consistently applied nor clearly defined, the different terms do also represent different approaches and theoretical perspectives on the issue. In my meta-analysis, I therefore also included research in other fields (such as sustainable business models, hybrid organizations, social business/enterprise, transformation and *SME* studies), given that business growth had been identified and discussed therein as an issue of concern.

The selected body of literature eventually included 69 texts that were identified as being immediately relevant to the issue, based on a *Boolean* search for "degrowth AND business", including their current synonyms, in German, French and English, across various databases, search engines, journals and bibliographies. These were then analysed against a framework of criteria containing notions of organizational "growth" and "degrowth", the importance given to legal and organizational structures, business models, and value logics, the respectively theoretical backgrounds of the papers and the role assigned to businesses in processes of transformation. Based on that meta-analysis, I identified two, hitherto unrelated strands of research, each typically based on different notions of de/growth and with utterly different implications for practice.

One strand of research does focus on the *external impact of business de/growth, in terms of (mainly environmental) externalities*, advocating the expansion of sustainable businesses, at the expense of others. I called that strand the "*good growth paradigm*". In very rough terms, it is based on the premise that there are "good" and "bad" businesses, and that change happens when the good ones supersede the bad ones, as it were – a path towards sustainable degrowth that's recurrently being referred to as "selective sufficiency" (cf. Stengel 2011) or "substitutive growth" (cf. Posse 2016). In the literature, I identified two characteristic approaches to that paradigm: The "*sufficiency approach*", as I called it, focuses on the role of business to actively promote sufficient consumer lifestyles, mainly through innovative product-service systems, access/sharing and repair solutions (cf. e. g. Griese et al. 2015; Paech 2016; Palzkill and Schneidewind 2013) – an approach that clearly rests on the very growth of these new sustainable business models. The "*ecological allowance approach*", similarly, provides an absolute measure for the "right size" of a business, within certain ecological limits – staying within these, again, it should still be allowed to grow (cf. Reichel 2013, 16; Reichel and Seeberg 2011). As exemplars of the "*good growth paradigm*", both approaches focus on the impact of business growth, they identify "good" companies in that respect and want them to grow, making these "good-growers" the agents of transformation.

Another strand of research focuses on the *internal impact of business growth on the organization itself*, advocating the spread of "growth-independent" businesses of limited size and scope. I called that strand the "*small is beautiful paradigm*". In very rough terms again, it is based on the simple observation that there are "big" and "small" businesses, and on the premise that the latter could provide the breeding ground for an economy that's focused on becoming "better", instead of just "bigger". Economic growth is seen here as a problem for businesses – one which they are well-advised to elude, for two basic reasons: Research focusing on "*dis-economies of scale*" typically highlights the negative net effects of business growth and how to avoid or resist them, strategically. *SME* studies in particular have consistently shown the negative implications of a narrowly capitalist understanding of growth on an organization – and how individual entrepreneurs managed to elude or prevent these (cf. e. g. Morris et al. 2006; Souza and Seifert 2018). Another, closely related approach focuses on alternative, *positive notions of growth*, showing that "getting better instead of bigger", through an uncompromising commitment to "excellence" and "quality" in products, services, processes and relationships alike, can be both a valuable contribution to sustainable degrowth and a successful strategy to elude the drivers and pressures of growth that inevitably come with competition on an abstract, placeless market (cf. e. g. Burlingham 2016; Deimling 2016; Gebauer et al. 2015). So, the "*small is beautiful paradigm*" focuses on the impact of growth on the organization itself, and it shows that not growing, as a business, is possible and also sometimes preferable, both in terms of organizational stability and sustainable degrowth, making these "small beauties" the agents of transformation.

The above *2×2 matrix* aims to locate the prospective agents of transformation identified by this research ("*good-growers*" and "*small beauties*") as against "conventional" businesses ("*high-growers*" and "*traditionalists*"): "*High-growers*" in that heuristic matrix are businesses that aim for growth, as a primary formal target, pretty much according to the textbook. "*Good-growers*", then, are "sustainable businesses" that identify growth with increasing their good impact, adhering to what I had coined the "*good growth paradigm*". "*Traditionalists*" follow primarily substantive targets, including "quality" in various aspects, and if they grow at all, it is but a means to achieve these other goals. "*Small beauties*", eventually, are those businesses that wish to be sustainable by limiting their size, according to the "*small is beautiful paradigm*".

Each of the paradigms that I just introduced claims a different role for businesses in the transition to sustainable degrowth. Each, however, does also face its very own "growth dilemma": The "good growth paradigm" does practically ignore size as an issue, and it's also blind to systemic pressures and drivers of growth, particularly related to competition (cf. Vogel 2018). The "small is beautiful" paradigm, on the other hand, is not quite clear about just how its individual niche strategies could be scaled up.

For the rest of this paper, I will try to tie up these loose ends in a more integrated approach to "business beyond growth" – a clearly *synthetic* concept that, eventually, shall also include the more radical (mainstream) degrowth preference for non-market actors, as agents of transformation.

4 Synthesis: How to elude the "growth dilemma"

In an effort to synthesize the different approaches just mentioned, I focus on two aspects that shall provide a common ground and may also help us to determine what it is, eventually, that constitutes a "business beyond growth" – over and above being "sustainable". These two aspects are 1) a *cooperative mind-set* and 2) a *new political role for business*. Both are characteristic of the social innovation that seems necessary in order for businesses to be part of the "escape from the economy" that degrowth seeks.

4.1 A cooperative mind-set

Cooperation as a business strategy, certainly, is not entirely a new thing. Despite the ideal of the "free", perfectly competi-

article	concept in focus	dimensions of concept					
		post-capita-list values & goals – sustainability (cf. section 2)	*sufficiency/self-limitation (cf. section 3) in terms of*		*cooperation with others (cf. section 4.1)*	*political role of business (cf. section 4.2) in terms of*	
			effects	size		democratic governance	republican co-respon-sibility
Bender & Bernholt 2017	"solidary post-growth business"	×	×		×	×	
Deimling 2016	"growth-neutral business"	×	×	×	×		
Gebauer 2018	business with "post-growth contributions"	×	×		×	×	
Johanisova et al. 2013	"social enterprise for degrowth"	×		×	×	×	×
Khmara & Kronenberg 2018	"alternative business model"	×	×		×	×	×
Millstone 2017	"pioneering company" for degrowth	×	×		×		×
Niessen 2013	"business beyond growth"	×	×	×	×		
Paech 2016	"post-growth business"	×	×		×		
Palzkill & Schneidewind 2013	"sufficiency business model"	×	×		×		
Posse 2015	"sustainable business"	×	×	×	×		
Puhakka 2018	"sustainable degrowth business"	×	×	×	×		×
Schmid 2018	"post-growth organization"	×	×	×	×		×
Schubring et al. 2013	"sustainability-oriented post-growth business"	×		×	×	×	
Vandevoort 2018	"viable degrowth business model"	×		×	×	×	
Wiefek & Heinitz 2018	"common good-oriented companies for degrowth"	×	×		×		×

Table 1: key dimensions of a [business beyond growth] being mapped to pertinent conceptual articles

tive market, cooperation under neoliberalism has not only been a reality, it's also become something of an ideal, epitomized in concepts such as "coopetition" (cf. Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996), "clusters" (cf. Porter 1998) or also the idea of "creating shared value" (cf. Porter and Kramer 2011) that's based on the latter and supposed even to provide a convincing "business case" for *CSR*. Certainly, these ideas did originate from strategic management, they neatly fit with what's been called the "new capitalist spirit" of networking (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018), and they're eventually all about a "new economics of competition" (cf. Porter 1998) that, by way of accumulating "social capital", reduces transaction costs and boosts efficiency (cf. Fukuyama 1995). So, while cooperation in that context is all about maximizing profits, it is obviously the mind-set that makes all the difference when it comes to *degrowth*. Thus, research here has shown multiple ways of how "sustainable businesses", being based on a non-capitalist economic rationality, can cooperate in order to elude growth constraints or increase their joint "good impact". Actually, various types of cooperation between different groups of actors can be distinguished here:

- *B2B cooperation*, ranging from loose forms of resource and contract sharing (cf. Gebauer et al. 2015), "dispersed operations" (cf. Millstone 2017; Scholz 2016; Kunze and Becker 2015) and "upscaling" schemes through business-model sharing (cf. Cyron and Zoellick 2018; Gebauer and Ziegler 2013; Schubring et al. 2013) to "coopetition" as a way to jointly develop a "good" market (cf. Kostakis et al. 2018) – so it is all about maximizing impact without the need for organizational expansion in size and reach.
- *B2C cooperation*, mainly in terms of adapting existing schemes of "collaborative value creation (*CVC*)" or "co-creation" with "prosumers" (cf. Hankammer and Kleer 2018; Niessen 2013; Puhakka 2018), to tap their potential for decentralized, small-scale production based on new "appropriate technologies".
- *B2E cooperation*, when it comes to jointly reducing working hours as a means to limit growth, increase organizational resilience and produce "time-wealth" for employees (cf. Jorck and Schrader 2019; Jorck and Gebauer 2015), tackling the capitalist production of wage labour as a major growth-driver.
- *Co-operatives*, as one of only few legal forms supposed to support degrowth (cf. e. g. Novkovic and Webb 2014) – actually the only formal business that's usually considered in mainstream debates on degrowth, along with
- *P2P cooperation*, in terms of solidary, community- or commons-based, often non-market or also non-monetary economies (cf. Bloemmen et al. 2015; Joutsenvirta 2016; Kostakis et al. 2018) and
- *B2P cooperation*, in terms of bridging and extending the "liminal zone" to the non-monetized economies of care and nature, in order to accumulate "non-market capitals" (cf. Johanisova et al. 2013) and integrate extra-economic practices and logics to "expand spaces of non-capitalist being-in-common" (Schmid 2018, 28).

In the context of degrowth, cooperation is basically seen as a mind-set that negates the capitalist logics of competition and eventually enables a transformation of that system, in two ways: *immediately*, by fostering "good growth", within that system (cf. above), and *intermediately*, by changing its very rules, logics and frameworks. Both these intentions are actually deeply political – and necessary for the degrowth transition.

4.2 A new political role for businesses

This, again, is not an entirely new issue in the discourse on businesses. Indeed, while under classical neoliberalism, assigning to businesses a "social responsibility" for "collectivist ends" had still been considered an illegitimate misalliance of economic and political "mechanisms" and, thus, a "fundamentally subversive doctrine" (cf. Friedman 1970), the soon dominant "business case" argument for *CSR* successfully flipped that narrative, arguing that businesses in many ways were even in a better situation to solve social problems or contribute to social progress than governments or civil society (cf. Porter and Kramer 2011) – a truly "post-democratic" advance (Crouch 2011, 125 ff.) soon to be echoed, however, by critics hoping to employ *TNCs* as change agents in the *Global South*.

While *CSR* did so claim to *resocialize* "the economy" and its institutions, this in effect often boiled down to a questionable "*ersatz politics*" (cf. Reich 2007), hand in hand with a lopsided politization of people as sovereign "consumer citizens". Conversely, what degrowth calls for is a *re-politization* of "the economy" that doesn't entail commodification, but instead a "re-embedding" of the economic into the political, democratic process (cf. Kallis 2017; Fournier 2008). This debate, however, has been largely limited to either top-down regulations by governments or bottom-up changes by citizens, leaving void the space between them.

At the same time, most of the research in the sample, in its focus on businesses has been rather *apolitical* in nature. Certainly, all authors emphasized the immediate commitment of these businesses to social and environmental concerns – contrary to viewing the common good as merely a "positive externality" of profitable economic activity in a "free market". On top of being sustainable, this included the goal of limiting growth by way of self-limitation or contributing to sufficient lifestyles (cf. above). Beyond that immediate commitment to the *res publica*, however, two more obviously political issues were emphasized: "Democratic governance" of the organization and a "republican co-responsibility" for the politico-economic framework.

Of the 15 articles (out of 69) that provided some more elaborate definition or model of a business beyond growth, ten did clearly recognize and discuss at least one of these more deeply political aspects. Some highlighted the importance of "democratic governance" in terms of deep participation by employees and other stakeholders in decision-making, also emphasizing the role of appropriate legal forms to support such processes (cf. Bender and Bernholt 2017; Gebauer 2018; Johanisova et al. 2013; Khmara and Kronenberg 2018; Schubring et al. 2013; Vandevoort 2018). Others emphasized businesses' active political role in shaping structures and frameworks that eventually make sustainable business the rule (Johanisova et al. 2013; Khmara and Kronenberg 2018; Millstone 2017; Puhakka 2018; Schmid 2018; Wiefek and Heinitz 2018).

5 Conclusion

The transformation to sustainable degrowth necessitates a "repolitization and democratization" of the economy – that's pretty much common sense in the discourse on degrowth (cf. Schmelzer and Vetter 2019, 27 f.; cf. also Kallis et al. 2020). Yet, as I wanted to show, the same holds true for businesses, because they are and will be the key actors in the economy and its transformation. What is needed, thus, is *social innovations* of businesses that move beyond capitalism both in terms of ends and means, i. e. businesses that aim at being sustainable and, on top of that, co-create new economies beyond growth that support this aim – which is a deeply political effort. This is where a "practice-theoretical" politics of degrowth (cf. Schmid 2018), finally, coincides with the premises of republican business ethics (Ulrich 2008). Table 1 sums up these key dimensions of a business beyond growth developed throughout this paper and maps them to a sub-selection of pertinent conceptual texts.

Annotation

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