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## **POSTGROWTH, CARE AND SOCIAL POLICY: MAKING CONNECTIONS**

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# POSTGROWTH, CARE AND SOCIAL POLICY: MAKING CONNECTIONS

## Building the Future from the Present: Imagining Post-Growth, Post-Productivist Ecosocial Policy

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### Abstract

The environment remains on the margins of social policy. Bringing degrowth literature into conversation with social policy debates about decommodification, we argue that a re-imagined decommodification remains central to addressing the social-ecological challenges we face and to forging a post-growth, post-productivist ecosocial welfare state. We explore the implications of this for re-imagining and mapping three core areas of an ecosocial welfare state revolving around the work/welfare/care nexus: the redistribution of time across work and care; repurposing of active labour market measures; and reorienting cash transfers and services. In each case we discuss what decommodified social policy in the service of a post-growth, post-productivist future might entail. Acknowledging challenges, we identify how instances of prefiguration of policy programmes and experiments across various countries offer concrete compass points for further transformation and a necessary paradigmatic shift.

**Keywords:** Decommodification; degrowth; sustainability; participation income; climate crisis; prefiguration

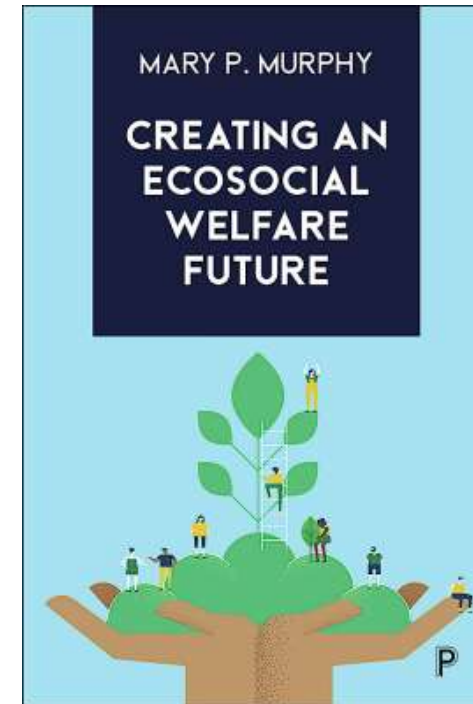
### Introduction

Despite growing environmental awareness and the imperatives of the climate crisis, the environment remains on the margins of social policy. As Gough (2017:2) argues social policy scholars have either 'blindly or willfully ignored the reality of environmental and planetary limits'. In this article we reflect on how we need to re-imagine the core social policy concept of decommodification. Decommodified forms of social policy have been transformed and eroded over the last fifty years of productivist social policy making. By bringing degrowth

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# POSTGROWTH, CARE AND SOCIAL POLICY: MAKING CONNECTIONS

Beveridge Report Collections: Towards a Sustainable Welfare State?



# OUTLINE

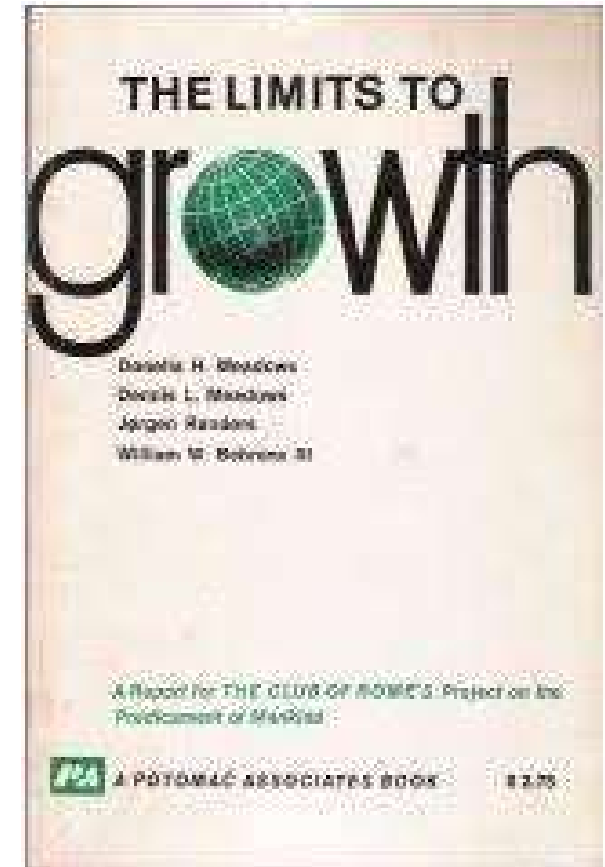
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- Degrowth/postgrowth – what is it?
- Challenges to social policy
- Degrowth/postgrowth proposals
- Reconceptualising work – care connections
- Reconceptualising work – care disconnections
- Re-imagining the welfare-work-care nexus

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# DEGROWTH/POSTGROWTH

- Sits within critiques of growth (many traditions and long history [Schmelzer, 2022](#))
- Specifically located / tied to limits to growth thinking in early 1970s and radical environmentalism of that decade.
- Term attributed to André Gorz (1972) *decroissance* / degrowth and associated with post-capitalism (as in necessary for survival and incompatible with capitalism)
- But the wider context was one of strong backlash to limits thinking - smothered by continued dominance of growth paradigms.
- Degrowth as a movement not apparent until the early 2000s, through activist networks in France, Italy, Spain...convergence of different strands of radical environmental thinking and activism...([Duverger, 2020](#))



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# DEGROWTH/ POSTGROWTH

- Travel from activism to academia very evident by 2010s (Image reproduced from [Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017](#) under Creative Commons License CC VY4.0)
- (Spain – Kallis/ South America – connections with buen vivir)
- An ecological, socio-economic and cultural critique of growth
- A focus on limits (planetary and social)
- An ‘equitable and democratic transition’ to less production and less consumption ([Martínez-Alier et al., 2010:1741](#)).



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# DEGROWTH/POSTGROWTH



- It is also quite distinct from other contemporary approaches – green growth, sustainable development, just transition, green new deals....
  - Growth is not questioned or insufficiently questioned in these approaches and productivism remains central.
  - **‘there are no scientific grounds upon which we should not question growth, if our goal is to avoid dangerous climate change and ecological breakdown’** ([Hickel and Kallis, 2020: 483](#)).
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# DEGROWTH/POSTGROWTH



- Problematises the fact that we not only live in a growth economy but a growth society, and it is necessary to 'decolonise the growth imaginary' and imagine a 'degrowth society' ([Latouche, 2010](#)).
  - Specifically problematises the contemporary work ethic - glorifies work and drives people to work harder and longer, reducing life to 'working more, earning more, selling more and buying more' ([Demaria et al., 2013: 197](#)).
  - In this sense degrowth is more than an increasingly urgent critique of growth in the face of the climate and other ecological crises, it is a utopian vision for a better society based on post-productivist values of conviviality, autonomy, sufficiency and care.
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# CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL POLICY

Degrowth goes against the grain of so much that has been foundational and taken for granted in social policy.

The principal political traditions upon which social policy rests are based on the 'conquest of nature' (Ferris, 1991).

Human nature and its fulfilment is limited by what is considered economically and technically feasible and detached from ecological limits (Hewitt, 2000).

Productivism is central to this understanding of human nature – employment ethic central to self-work and self.

Twinned with the 'accumulative impulse', which equates welfare and well-being with material affluence (Fitzpatrick, 1998).

(Also profoundly gendered assumptions - care work/reproductive work externalised, Economic Man escapes the limits of the eco-system and biological time, [Mellor, 2017](#)).

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# CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL POLICY

Ecological limits are not the only corrective to growth-based, productivist social policy. These limits chime with the many other ways in which welfare states are 'broken' entities in the context of a contemporary capitalism that is reaching the limits of the 'treadmill' of productivism and commodification as the organising logics of work, welfare and well-being ([Wiese and Mayrhofer, 2020](#)).

In particular, the social benefits of continued growth are highly questionable – diminishing returns of higher material standards of living for well-being and social relations ([Jackson, 2009](#); [Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009](#)).

Implies social limits or a social corrective to growth-based social policy in advanced welfare states.

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# DEGROWTH/ POSTGROWTH PROPOSALS

Most frequently focus on versions of universal basic income, reducing work time (Image reproduced from [Fitzpatrick et al., 2022](#) under Creative Commons license CC BY 4.0).

Re-distributing reproductive activities appears as a theme but is not very prominent in the literature, whereas reconceptualizing work is.



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# RECONCEPTUALISING WORK – CARE CONNECTIONS

Re-imagining work beyond paid work to ‘what gets done to make life possible’ (Pettinger, 2019: 5) - the tasks and activities carried out to ensure social reproduction, care and maintenance of ourselves and our communities chimes with feminist critique of work and the importance of care work.

UBI from this perspective enables **socially useful work**. It allows people to refuse work they do not want to do, but also allows people to positively choose work that contributes to the social good, which they actually want to do, but are sometimes forced out of because of poor pay, such as care work ([Mair et al., 2020](#); Jackson, 2021).

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# RECONCEPTUALISING WORK – CARE CONNECTIONS

Reducing working time enables **temporal autonomy** tailored to people's needs over the life-course.

Not about reducing the amount of time spent working but that they are embedded in a project to re-orient economies to the “reproductive” values of ecological and emotional labour’ (Fitzpatrick, 2004: 215).

However, while the re-conceptualisation of work within degrowth reflects feminist insights on the importance of care work, it does not necessarily fully consider its gendered nature and its gendered implications.

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# RECONCEPTUALISING WORK – CARE DISCONNECTIONS

There are obvious connections with eco-feminist political economy which have not been fully considered by degrowth ideas and proposals.

‘Ecofeminist political economy sees a connection between the exploitation of women's labour and the abuse of planetary resources. Women and the environment are both **marginalized** in their positions within the formal economy’ ([Mellor, 2005: 123](#)).

[Dengler and Strunk \(2018\)](#) note that care and the environment, both part of the ‘**maintenance economy**’, are structurally devalued in the growth imaginary and there is a synergy, albeit overlooked, to their role as a ‘reproductive economy of care’ in a degrowth context.

Arguably, full recognition of these connections is still lacking in degrowth ideas. **What might still be marginal in the maintenance economy?**

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# RECONCEPTUALISING WORK- CARE DISCONNECTIONS

‘Individual authors refer to a comprehensive definition of work, but the consequences thereof for a post-growth society remain murky. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the model contains wide-ranging implicit assumptions concerning the gender order: the care economy is vitally important for the postgrowth society, but its gendered nature is not recognized. ([Bauhardt, 2014: 65](#)).

Many of the solutions proposed by this approach imply a profound change in the gendered division of labour and the gendered appreciation of work processes, but there is no assessment of their concrete gender implications. (ibid.)

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# RECONCEPTUALISING WORK – CARE DISCONNECTIONS

[Saave and Muraca \(2021\)](#) point to the reality of unpaid care work which would not necessarily shrink in a post-growth economy, unlike paid work, and it may even grow.

‘The gender-related burden embedded in the idyllic idea of a happy life beyond work was for a long time a blind spot in the mainstream degrowth discourse’ (Saave and Muraca, 2021:752).

And, simply because there is more time for care work, in a degrowth society does not automatically imply it will be equitably distributed between women and men ([Littig, 2018](#)).

For [McGregor \(2021: 52\)](#) there is a risk of history repeating itself and the earlier erasure of eco-feminist thinking will happen again, so with degrowth, despite its potential, we need to ask ‘questions of power and justice, of who does what for whom and under what conditions’.

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# RE-IMAGINING THE WELFARE-WORK-CARE NEXUS

‘Neither state theories nor policies are especially popular in post-growth/degrowth circles’ ([Koch, 2020:127](#)).

‘Those who make degrowth policy proposals address them in a void’ ([D’Alisa and Kallis, 2020:7](#)).

How do we reach what seems ‘radically other?’ Can we start with the ‘situation of the present’ and the ‘materials at hand’ (Unger 1998)?

- Reorienting cash transfers and services to support new forms of sustainable participation
  - Redistribution of time across work and care
  - Repurposing of active labour market measures.
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# REORIENTING CASH TRANSFERS AND SERVICES TO SUPPORT NEW FORMS OF SUSTAINABLE PARTICIPATION

- UBI dominant but oversold?
  - Questions of cost ([Buchs, 2021](#); [Gough, 2020](#)) and whether it would detract from financing collective universal basic services (UBI).
  - Focus on maximising freedom/individual consumption overlooks wasteful/ over-consumption ([Mulvale, 2019](#)).
  - PI/Participation Income as a targeted measure has the potential to focus on societal goals such as care and ecological work, lessen the risk of over-consumption and better complement UBS ([Murphy and McGann, 2021](#)).
  - BIA as a PI experiment in Ireland – potential to expand to care work? (Also recognise the contribution of QAs?)
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# REDISTRIBUTION OF TIME ACROSS WORK AND CARE

- Social policy as the redistribution of time - offers multiple ways of reimagining how paid work might be redistributed across the working week, gender and the life-course, all of which have potential to link with the ecological dimension of degrowth/post-growth.
  - Proposals / experiments include shorter working weeks, long part time hours (30 per week) and three-quarter working time arrangements. Many countries, led by the Nordic states, are experimenting with parental and paternity leave policies that enable a shift from adult-worker regimes to 'universal care giver' regimes, where care and paid work are more equally shared within households (Folbre 2021).
  - Also need to focus on the drawbacks of raising the pension age and the 'commodification of life's time' ([Biggs et al. 2017](#))
  - Environmental gains evident in reduced working time ([Gough, 2013](#); [Jackson, 2009](#)) but gender goals around the redistribution of time across work and care need to be explicit.
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# REPURPOSING OF ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET MEASURES

- Trends and potential to re-orient ALMPs away from conditional/coercive insertion into the paid labour market?
  - A long way to go but potential in reforms that focus on capability and sustainable participation and forms of work that recognise socially useful and ecological work which overlap with PI and are complemented by UBS.
  - Participation Acts in the Netherlands and Germany and local experiments in Denmark and Scotland ([Larruffa et al., 2021](#)), where welfare claimants are enabled to identify and take up forms of socially valuable participation. Projects documented by [Stamm et al. \(2020\)](#) including bike repair, organic food production, community arts....
  - Potential for re-imagining CE along these lines?
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