

Degrowth and the British Labour Party.

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Abstract

Like other left of centre parties in Europe, the British Labour Party has always been an alliance of diverse political currents. While the model of mitigating capitalism and sharing the “benefits of growth” with “the many not the few” has long been dominant, there are other tendencies and influences going right back to early scholar-activists like William Morris and Robert Blatchford and to earlier movements. The New Left also brought a degree of ecological understanding into the Labour movement although those voices were subsequently marginalised during more than a quarter century of neoliberalism's dominance, most notably under Tony Blair's leadership. Today the crisis of neoliberal capitalism has led to a taking back of the party by a broad left under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell. Both have made promising statements on the ecological crisis, in McDonnell's case with an acknowledgement of material limits to economic activity and expansion. However, in practice the left tends to fall back on a post-Keynesian, “green growth” and techno-optimistic framework. I will explore the extent to which the Labour Party and movement is open to degrowth concepts and proposals with observations from both regional and national political contexts.

The British Labour Party, past and present.

The British Labour Party has been the site of a resurgence of radicalism in the context of the economic, social and political crisis post the 2007-8 Great Financial Crash. Is this resurgence an opening to a degrowth perspective? To explore this question requires an understanding of what the Labour Party is. It also requires some understanding of the roots of the party: what historical and cultural background can be drawn from in making a realistic assessment of the possibilities and the challenges of degrowth for Labour – or of Labour for the degrowth movement?

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Labour has always been an uneasy alliance of socialists (Marxist, Christian, utopian, empirical, humanist...) and non-socialists (liberals, social democrats and non-ideological cadres) and those who simultaneously espouse or hold to more than one perspective. Over the period from around 1983 (Kinnock's election) to 2010 (Miliband's election), the right was in the ascendancy, almost silencing discussion of alternative approaches to economy and society under a kind of "neoliberalism lite" ideology. This was not unprecedented: there was the retreat from socialism after the defeat of the 1926 General Strike and the entry of Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald into a Conservative led "National Government". Socialist idealism was rekindled under the leadership of George Lansbury and some of this taken into the postwar reforming government of Atlee². The right was again in the ascendancy with the revisionism under the leadership of Gaitskell during the wilderness years of the 1950s and early 60s: this led to a kind of compromise under Wilson (Prime Minister 1964-1970 and 1974-1976 – Labour continued in government until Thatcher's election in 1979). Right and Left in the party battled over policy and organisation but the Right under Kinnock, Smith and Blair succesively marginalised the Left and with it almost any mention of socialism: Thatcher's TINA ("There is no alternative") had become hegemonic along with neoliberalism.

Today the crisis of neoliberal capitalism has led to a taking back of the party by a broad left under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell. As we will see, this appears to have opened a space for heretical ideas. Mostly the running has been made by those with a broadly Keynesian perspective but other ideas are also being tried out.

The hidden traditions of British socialism³

The land: Peasants, Levellers and Diggers

Ideas that we can now recognise as part of the degrowth family are part of the history, and indeed traditions, of the Labour Party, the Labour Movement and British socialism⁴. The earliest English radicals for whom there is any

2 Atlee's government was reforming at home but Atlanticist and largely imperialist in its foreign policy.

3 The discussion that follows is not exhaustive, for example it does not explore Cobbett's influence, nor the land rights activism in Scotland (the Crofters' War, see Devine, T. M. (2013). *Clanship to crofter's war: the social transformation of the Scottish highlands*. Manchester: Manchester Univ Press.), but instead is intended to demonstrate the existence of degrowth-friendly traditions and undercurrents in the British Labour and socialist movement. See Williams, R. (1975). *Culture and society: 1780 - 1950* (Repr. 1963). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. pp. 23-39; Thompson, E. P. (1988). *The making of the English working class*. Harmondsworth. pp. 820-837.

4 These are distinct but overlapping and interpenetrating categories. The Labour Party was established as the "political instrument" of organised labour, the trade union movement. But other currents merged into it, including Marxists from the Social Democratic Federation (many of them via the Independent Labour Party) and those whose primary identification was the co-operative movement: the Co-operative Party still exists as an affiliate of the Labour Party and tending to sit towards Labour's right wing today.

kind of historical record, are those associated with the Peasants' Revolt. This arose at a time of economic stress and demands included the abolition of serfdom, the distribution of Church and feudal lands, and (in varying degrees) the abolition of the property owning class, although not the monarchy⁵.

With the “World turned upside-down” in the English revolution that overthrew the monarchy in the seventeenth century, a more coherent set of philosophies emerged. Two currents, the Levellers and the Diggers presented their demands and philosophies. The Levellers called for “a broader [electoral] franchise, governments elected by popular mandate, religious tolerance and a fair and equitable legal system”, commonplace now but astonishing in 1640. The Diggers, or True Levellers, went further, calling for the private ownership of land to be abolished, and “the common treasury” of the earth to be shared. Private property was not to be abolished but most commodities would be kept in common storehouses, for use by the people as needed⁶. The Diggers, led by Gerard Winstanley also carried out nonviolent direct action through land occupation, reminiscent of the, far more successful, Brazilian landless workers movement today. The diggers praxis was shaped by the reinterpretation of the Bible (in the ferment of the Reformation struggle between varieties of Christianity), and by the reality of the transition from feudalism to early agrarian capitalism, with its impacts on livelihoods. They were not successful, but it has been argued that their ideas lived on, underground, to emerge in later incarnations of radicalism.

Whether a result of direct lineage, or because of the repetition of analogous generative conditions. As Williams⁷ puts it,

“In Britain, identifiably, there is a precarious but persistent rural-intellectual radicalism: genuinely and actively hostile to industrialism and capitalism; attached to country ways and feelings, the literature and the lore.”

He goes on,

“... we must push the argument through to the roots that are being defended; push attention, human attention, back to the natural economy, the organic society, from which the critical values are drawn.”

Williams later noted that in the 1973 book from which the above quotes are taken, he was criticising the dominant tendency of the Labour Party then, for which socialism was no more than “a successful industrial capitalism without the capitalists”⁸. Williams characterises himself as a Romantic, but is careful to distinguish his variant from the mystifying romanticism that obscures social

5 Vallance, E. (2010). *A radical history of Britain: visionaries, rebels and revolutionaries - the men and women who fought for our freedoms* (Repr). London: Abacus.

6 Winstanley, G. (1973). *The law of freedom, and other writings*. (C. Hill, Ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

7 Williams, R. (1973). *The country and the city*. London: Chatto and Windus. p.36.

8 Williams, R. (2015). *Politics and letters: interviews with New left review*. London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso. p.314.

relations through an uncritical valorisation of an imagined, idealised past. Löwy and Sayre, suggest that,

“Williams's distinctive contribution, then, was to have shown the effective presence, through the historical unfolding of the Romantic vision, of pre-capitalist values in the modern emancipatory project”⁹.

I will return to Williams, and especially his later work, which comes even closer to degrowth, but first it is necessary to discuss the nineteenth century current of degrowth-like thinking in British socialism.

The Chartists

The Chartists are generally known for their great petition for electoral reform and universal (male) suffrage. Less well known are some of their other initiatives and concerns. The Land Plan, for example was concerned with establishing

“a scheme of spade-tilled smallholdings, which would provide an alternative means of livelihood for the factory workers and so enable them to bargain for their labour power.”¹⁰

After the rejection of their petition, and the political repression in the wake of the revolutions of 1848, many Chartists focussed on this and other self-help and community-building activities:

“... Sunday Schools, Land Company branches, co-operative societies, mechanics' institutes and other bodies which had, to some extent provided means of escape for the better-off working class families as well as providing a vested interest in peaceful relations and municipal development.”¹¹

Thompson suggests that,

“When a new political labour movement arose, four decades after the end of Chartism, it arose from these “non-political” forms of labour organization...

“... to see such activities as 'non-political' is to use a very narrow definition of politics”.¹²

9 Löwy, M., & Sayre, R. (2018). Raymond Williams, Romanticism and Nature. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 29(2), 75–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1407070> p.79.

10 Thompson, D. (2015). *The dignity of chartism: essays by Dorothy Thompson*. (S. Roberts, Ed.). London ; New York: Verso. p. 130.

11 Thompson, D. (2015). as above. p. 172.

12 Thompson, D. (2015). *The dignity of chartism*. As above. pp. 182, 183.

These concerns with cultural activity and community solidarity¹³, and with subsistence as a buffer against labour exploitation, have strong resonances in our times with the degrowth and allied movements¹⁴ and are far from the Fabian socialist model of reforms designed and implemented by experts and brought about through representative democracy.

William Morris

Morris was not originally a political activist. While he became active, initially through outrage about the British government's support for Turkish repression in Bulgaria, his political outlook was rooted in his concern for beauty and dignified work. But Morris is a pivotal figure. He linked a Marxist understanding of capitalism, and its assault on both people and nature, with a positive and romantic understanding of alternative possible social arrangements.

“It is profit which draws men into enormous unmanageable aggregations called towns, for instance; profit which crowds them up when they are there into quarters without gardens or open spaces; profit which won’t take the most ordinary precautions against wrapping a whole district in a cloud of sulphurous smoke; which turns beautiful rivers into filthy sewers, which condemns all but the rich to live in houses idiotically cramped and confined at the best, and at the worst in houses for whose wretchedness there is no name.”¹⁵

Morris was explicitly critical of the production of “useless things” by capitalist production. He emphasised the production of useful goods and foresaw the reduction in the desire for consumer goods under the “equality of condition” that socialism would bring.

“Wealth is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. The sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food, raiment and housing necessary and decent; the storing up of knowledge of all kinds, and the power of disseminating it; means of free communication between man and man; works of art, the beauty which man creates when he is most a

13 For the scale of this counter-cultural working class infrastructure see Burton, M., & Steady State Manchester. (2012). *In Place of Growth: Practical steps to a Manchester where people thrive without harming the planet*. Manchester: Steady State Manchester. pp. 39-40.

https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/inplaceofgrowth_ipog_-content_final.pdf
https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/inplaceofgrowth_ipog_-content_final.pdf

14 Mies, M., & Bennholdt-Thomsen, V. (1999). *The subsistence perspective : beyond the globalized economy*. London: Zed Books; Vergara-Camus, L. (2014). *Land and freedom: the MST, the Zapatistas and peasant alternatives to neoliberalism*. London: Zed Books. Hopkins, R. (2008). *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local resilience*. Totnes: Green Books.

15 Morris, W. (1979). How we live and how we might live. In A. L. Morton (Ed.), *Political writings of William Morris* (pp. 134–158). New York: International Publishers: p.153. (Original work published 1884 – cited in Macdonald, B. J. (2004). William Morris and the vision of ecosocialism. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 7(3), 287–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1028258042000266013>

man, most aspiring and thoughtful—all things which serve the pleasure of people, free, manly and uncorrupted. This is wealth. Nor can I think of anything worth having which does not come under one or other of these heads. But think, I beseech you, of the product of England, the workshop of the world, and will you not be bewildered, as I am, at the thought of the mass of things which no sane man could desire, but which our useless toil makes—and sells?”¹⁶

“Like Marx, then, Morris showed how “surplus value” leads to exploitation, but he realised that this applied not just to the majority of humanity, but to the whole of Nature. Morris also stressed the importance of what we may call “surplus product” - the over-production of shoddy, trashy goods, and the over- exploitation of Nature needed to support it.”¹⁷

This is substantially the position articulated by contemporary eco-Marxists such as Moore, Burkett and Foster¹⁸.

As Williams notes,

“Morris wanted the end of the capitalism system, and the institution of socialism, so that men could decide for themselves how their work should be arranged, and where machinery was appropriate.”¹⁹

The simple equation of Morris with “handicrafts-get rid of machines”, obscures his very much more radical analysis and proposals in his mature work. Williams continues,

“He is often mentioned by members of the Labour Party, but usually in terms that suggest a very limited acquaintance with his actual ideas. He is, for instance, something very different from an orthodox Fabian. Socialism for him, is not merely “substituting business-like administration in the interests of the public for the old Whig muddle of laissez-faire backed up by coercion”²⁰. This was the socialism the utilitarians had come to, but Morris, always, applied to socialism the

16 Morris, W. (1884). Useful work versus useless toil. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/useful.htm>

17 O’Sullivan, P. (1990). Struggle for the Vision Fair: Morris and Ecology. *Journal of William Morris Studies*, 8(4), 5–9. p.7. <http://www.morrissociety.org/JWMS/08.4Spring1990/SP90.8.4.OSullivan.pdf>

18 Bellamy Foster, J., Clark, B., & York, R. (2011). *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth*. New York: New York University Press / Monthly Review Press.; Moore, J. W. (2015). *Capitalism in the web of life: ecology and the accumulation of capital* (1st Edition). New York: Verso.; Burkett, P. (2009). *Marxism and ecological economics : toward a red and green political economy*. Haymarket Books.

19 Williams, R. (1958). *Culture and society: 1780 - 1950* (Repr. 1963). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. p.159.

20 Morris, W. (1983). *Communism*. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1893/commune.htm>

modes of judgement which had been developed in opposition to utilitarianism."²¹

As Williams observes, Morris is sometimes referred to by Labour Party figures. However, this is not always in a simplistic way, equating him with utopian socialism. Jon Cruddas MP, often described as a leading Labour intellectual, explored the continuing relevance of Morris in his 2013 George Lansbury lecture. He echoes Williams and the Marxist historian E.P. Thomson in seeing Morris as the link between the conception of true wealth, rather than exchange value,

*"... grounded in the emancipatory conception of human labour and creativity. Art continues a politics of resistance to life being commodified. This is what constitutes socialism. ... It is a continuous struggle, not just against capitalism – given its alienating effects on human creativity – but also left-wing utilitarianism and Fabianism. Socialist change is not simply political and economic change – the "machinery" of socialism – as [Morris] called it – but heightened consciousness that aims to realise a person's true capacities".*²²

So on the one hand we have the legacy of Morris as a kind of socialist conscience for a Labour party that all too easily slips into what might be termed a post-colonial model of social administration with growthism (Williams's "triumphalist arguments about production" in another guise) as its preferred economic ideology. On the other hand, there is his legacy as a socialist activist,

*"The three great prophets of Labour and the ILP: Kier Hardie, Ramsey MacDonald and George Lansbury ... were all driven by a profound sense of human fellowship forged alongside Morris in the 1880s."*²³

But he also made a significant organising contribution, for some years pretty much full time²⁴, to the organisations that were to become tributaries of the modern Labour Party: the Social Democratic Federation and Socialist League (with Eleanor Marx), one of whose branches (Bradford) became the forerunner of the Independent Labour Party. Morris edited *Commonweal*, the newspaper of the League, an important source of socialist ideas for the Labour Movement as it came together organisationally at the end of the nineteenth century. He was the inspiration for Blatchford²⁵ whose Clarion

21 Williams, R. (1975). *Culture and society: 1780 - 1950* (Repr. 1963). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. p.160.

22 Cruddas, J. (2013). Jon Cruddas's George Lansbury memorial lecture: full text. *New Statesman*. Retrieved from <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/11/jon-cruddass-george-lansbury-memorial-lecture-full-text>

23 Cruddas, J. (2013). as above.

24 Wilmer, C. (1993). Introduction. In C. Wilmer (Ed.), *News from nowhere and other writings [of William Morris]*. London: Penguin Books.

25 Waters, C. (1982). William Morris and the Socialism of Robert Blatchford. *Journal of William Morris Studies*, 5(2), 20–31.

Club was one of the alternative cultural organisations that, along with the co-operative movement, demonstrates that Labour can be more than just the political wing of trade unionism.

Raymond Williams

Raymond Williams has already been introduced as a cultural theorist. A working class boy (his father was a signalman) from the Welsh border (his village, Pandy, is between Abergavenny and Hereford) he went to Cambridge University, worked for many years in the Workers Educational Association before returning to Cambridge and eventually becoming professor of drama. Williams, then, was located at the intersections of the Labour movement and the country, political struggle and cultural theory, literature and politics, Wales and England and Labour and the wider left. He was one of the founding figures of the “First New Left”, editing the 1968 May Day Manifesto²⁶, but he was also in later life the Vice President of the Socialist Environment and Resources Association (SERA) one of the handful of socialist societies that as affiliates of the Labour Party act as a source of policy ideas and comradely criticism.

It was to SERA that Williams presented his analysis of Socialism and Ecology²⁷ in 1982. As usual he was at pains to direct his critique to both the romanticising and mystifying view of the past, in this case in the ecological movement, and to the lazy tendency of the socialist and social democratic movement, especially in government, to merely offer a better administration of an essentially capitalist economy.

“In a large part of the ecological movement as it developed ... there was an in-built tendency to contrast the damaging, industrial order with the undamaging, natural, pre-industrial order.

...

“On the other hand there can be a simplification the other way round. As socialism, from around the middle of the nineteenth century, began to distinguish itself from a whole body of associated and overlapping movements, there was a tendency to make a quite different emphasis: to say that the central problem of modern society was poverty, and the solution to poverty was production, and more production.”²⁸

...

26 Williams, R. (1968). *May Day Manifesto 1968*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

27 Williams, R. (1982). *Socialism and Ecology*. London: SERA. Reprinted in Williams, R. (1989). *Resources of hope : culture, democracy, socialism*. London; New York: Verso. The original talk (the written text is a more theoretical and historical piece) is available as a video at <https://youtu.be/EiFWHtKOcj0>
See also *Between Country and City* in the same volume.

28 Williams, R. (1982). *Socialism and Ecology* as above, pp 212-213.

“The essential case is that the wealth and the poverty, the order and the disorder, the production and the damage, are all parts of the same process. In any honest account you have to see that they are all connected, and that doing more of one kind of thing does not necessarily mean that you'll have less of the other.”²⁹

Williams's overall outlook is strikingly similar to that of the degrowth movement. Here he is on the reception of Limits to Growth:

What kind of culture is it, when some serious analysis appears and is almost at once placed as another instalment of 'doom and gloom'? What kind of culture is it which pushes distraction, in its ordinary selection even of news, to the point where there is hardly any sustained discussion of the central and interlocking issues of human survival? There are times, in the depth of the current crisis, when the image materialises of a cluttered room in which somebody is trying to think, while there is a fan-dance going on in one corner and a military band blasting away in the other. It is not the ordinary enjoyments of life that are diverting serious concern, as at times, in a natural human rhythm, they must and should. It is a systemic cacophony which may indeed not be bright enough to know that it is jamming and drowning the important signals, but which is nevertheless, and so far successfully, doing just that.”³⁰

Towards the end of *Towards 2000*, the book from which the above quotation comes, he argues that a unified alternative social theory requires three shifts in perspective. Firstly

“... the connection between the forces and relations of production has to be restated. ... The necessary new position is that this orientation to the world as raw material necessarily includes an attitude to people as raw material. It is this use and direction of actual majorities of other people as a generalised input of 'labour' which alone makes possible the processes of generalised capital and technology. Thus the drive to use the earth as raw material has involved, from the beginning, the practical subordination of such majorities by a variety of means: military, political, economic, ideological.

“... We are now in a position where we can monitor our interventions and control them accordingly. We can select those many interventions which support and enhance life ... and reject those many other interventions which have been shown to be damaging or to involve the reasonable possibility of damage. This is the central ecological argument, But it can only prevail if we unite it with the political and

29 Williams, R. (1982). *Socialism and Ecology* as above, p. 215.

30 Williams, R. (1985). *Towards 2000*. Harmondsworth: Penguin: p.18.

*economic argument, in ways that change what we have become used to as politics and economics.*³¹

Secondly, The emphasis needs to shift from the theoretical focus on the mode of production, used in charting the development of social and economic arrangements over time, to a focus on livelihoods³².

*The old orientation of raw material for production is rejected, and in its place there is the new orientation of livelihood: of practical, self-managing, self-renewing societies, in which people care first for each other, in a living world.*³³

Thirdly, he points out the importance of emotion in the new politics of peace, ecology, feminism. He thereby argues against the stark contrast between “emotion” and “intelligence”.

*“If our central attention is on whole ways of life, there can be no reasonable contrast between emotions and rational intelligence. The concern with forms of whole relationship excludes these specialised and separated projections. the habit of separating the different kinds of good from each other is entirely a consequence of a deformed social order, in which rational intelligence has so often to try to justify emotionally unacceptable or repulsive actions.”*³⁴

This has some resonance with one of his most original concepts in cultural studies, the “structures of feeling” which are captured by writers and artists during specific conjunctures. In his ground-breaking works he was already breaking down that barrier between intellect and emotion in social analysis. Williams's concerns went far beyond ecology. In the same 1985 book he also discussed the question of the post-war Welfare State, the achievement of the 1948 Labour government. Again, he identifies the limitations in the dominant social democratic and Fabian mode of Labour reform.

“What was argued in 1959, that the 'social services remain limited by assumptions and regulations belonging not to the new society but the old ', is still true but incomplete. There never was any way in which the genuinely new ideas and provisions for a caring society could persist as an exceptional sector, contradicted by systematic inequality and

31 Williams, R. (1985). as above, pp. 261-262

32 A perspective close to that of certain alternative currents in economic thought: e.g. Smith, P. B., & Max-Neef, M. A. (2011). *Economics unmasked: from power and greed to compassion and the common good*. Totnes, Devon, UK: Green Books; Hinkelammert, F. J., & Mora Jiménez, H. (2009). Por una economía orientada hacia la reproducción de la vida. An economy orientated towards the reproduction of life. *Iconos. Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, (33), 39–49. Retrieved from Por una economía orientada hacia la reproducción de la vida. <http://www.flacso.org.ec/docs/i33franz.pdf>; Acosta, A. (2016, March). Post-Growth and Post-Extractivism Two sides of the same cultural transformation. <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2016/4/6/post-growth-and-post-extractivism-two-sides-of-the-same-cultural-transformation>

33 Williams (1985). as above, p.266.

34 Williams (1985). as above, p. 266.

competition everywhere else. In fact the models of 'relief' and 'insurance', from the old order, provided a base from which, in a period of rising incomes, the idea of common provision was steadily weakened and interpreted as selective 'entitlement' and burdensome 'cost'. It is not by bureaucratic regulation, however complex, but only by direct communal administration that an idea of common welfare can become actual.

At the same time it is impossible that any of these problems can be, solved by measures based on the kind of fantasy which has grown in the shadow of the capitalist ideal of ever-expanding, ever-competitive, ever-successful production. The kinder—sounding fantasy of giving everybody more and more, so that no choices need ever be made, is the death-cry of an old social democracy. The world is not only as tough as the capitalists keep telling us; it is very much tougher. There are hard material limits, wherever they may finally and unevenly fall, on the indefinite production and consumption of goods which the capitalist system and its political junior partners have assumed and promised. Real sharing will have to occur, in some cases within increased production and available time, in other cases within stable or actually reduced resources and availabilities. The profound political problems of sharing, which if it succeeds can take us beyond an industrial capitalist order, can neither be evaded nor postponed by the old fable of the cake. A sharing society, in any case, has to begin by really sharing what it has, or all its talk of sharing is false or at best marginal. Moreover, sharing is not only at the receiving end; it is also, from the beginning, a matter of shared effort and responsibility. These are the only conditions for anything but an imposed and arbitrary stability, or an unstable chaos.”³⁵

It would be difficult to find a better statement of the degrowth position on social welfare.

Production for Need: the Lucas Plan.

In the 1970s, some in the Trade Union movement began to articulate an alternative vision of trade-union activism. Jack Mundy, leader of the Australian Building Workers Union toured the UK speaking about the “Green Bans” that his union had imposed on environmentally unfriendly construction. This was picked up by some members in UCATT, the corresponding British union: I remember joining a campaign against the demolition of an historic building, jointly organised by environmentalists and leftists, mostly communist party members, including Peter Carter, a building workers' leader in Birmingham. However this did not really take off as a movement.

³⁵ Williams (1985). as above, pp.100-101.

A more radical development was led by shop stewards in the Lucas Aerospace company who, in response to the plans of the firm to close plants and make workers redundant, instead of appealing to government for continued funding of this armaments industry, produced a set of proposals and prototypes that used the engineering skills and knowledge of the workers to create products that met a variety of needs. Examples included remote medical technology and an innovatory public transport vehicle that could run on road or rail³⁶. While this alternative plan was not successfully adopted, the initiative received support from Tony Benn, the soon to be displaced Technology minister, a key figure in the Labour Left, and by the Institute for Workers Control³⁷.

Degrowth currents in today's Labour

In a recent piece I identified a number of developments, in both Labour and in the political ecosystem to which it belongs, that seem to indicate some resurgence in the alternative socialist tradition discussed above³⁸. They were:

1. Involvement of some leading Labour MPs in the All Party Parliamentary Group on Limits to Growth.
2. John McDonnell's speech to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) which acknowledged the Limits to Growth and the existential risk of climate change.
3. Developments in some Labour led local governments that emphasise localism and the use of local wealth and financial flows (instead of globalised finance and inward investment) to fund needed economic and social developments.
4. Statements from a number of labour influencers that acknowledge elements of the degrowth proposition.
5. Significant involvement of trade unionists in the fossil fuel divestment and anti-fracking campaigns.
6. Backing by scores of Labour MPs for fossil fuel divestment.

To these can be added some developments in Labour policy, in particular the new approach to International Development, co-produced by Shadow

36 See <http://lucasplan.org.uk/>;

A summary of the plan is at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/o2sqxvhams2ywup/Lucas-Plan-53pp-alternative%20corporate%20plan.pdf?dl=0>;

see also Wainwright, H., and Elliott, D. (1982). *The Lucas Plan: A New Trade Unionism in the Making?* London, Allison & Busby;

Cooley, M. (1987). *Architect or bee? The human price of technology* (New ed). London: Hogarth.

37 Guinan, J. (2015). Bring back the Institute for Workers' Control. *Renewal*, 23(4), 11–36. Retrieved from https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/ren23.4_02guinan.pdf

38 Burton, M. (2018). Is the UK Labour party facing up to a post-growth future? Steady State Manchester website. <https://steadystatemanchester.net/2018/02/03/is-the-uk-labour-party-facing-up-to-a-post-growth-future/>

Minister Kate Osamor and “ a Task Force of 12 experts and activists³⁹”, and new thinking on forms of public ownership, less statist, more diverse⁴⁰. At best, Labour is adopting something akin to the alternative approach advocated by Williams and Morris, which asks how to construct a polity that is caring – for other people - at home and abroad and for the environment, and goes beyond the dominant model of capturing the state to administer a kinder version of the same economic system: capitalism.

Possibilities and challenges

The context for this partial opening to ideas from degrowth needs some exploration. With the financial crash of 2007-8 there was a collapse of neoliberalism's authority, previously dominant⁴¹, in Labour circles (manifested in the Labour party leadership in the two stage shift to the left via Miliband to Corbyn), a space has opened for alternative ideology. Now, degrowth and socialism are not the same thing by any means: there are socialists who believe that non-capitalist economic growth would not be harmful⁴². But in this period of interregnum, where the ruling ideology of market solutions and the subjugation of everything to what the Australians used to call “economic rationalism”⁴³ is being dumped, there is opening up, not just to eclipsed political theory, practice and tradition but also to new ideas. The family of political and economic approaches we now call degrowth is one source of ideas entering the new ideological maelstrom. Given its various roots in both radical political thought (discussed, for the British context, above) and robust scientific analysis (systems analysis, as in the work of Donella Meadows and

39 Osamor, K. (2018). *The Many Not the Few the Labour Party's Vision for International Development* (Opposition Green Paper). London: The Labour Party. Retrieved from https://www.policyforum.labour.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/World_For_The_Many.pdf

40 The Labour Party. (2017). *Alternative Models of Ownership: Report to the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer and Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy*. London: The Labour Party. Retrieved from <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Alternative-Models-of-Ownership.pdf>

41 Davies, W. (2016). The New Neoliberalism. *New Left Review*, (101), 121–134.

42 For a discussion and critique, see Kallis, G. (2017). Socialism Without Growth. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1386695>

43 “Economic rationalism” was a term eventually supplanted by “neoliberalism”, but it perhaps better captured the idea of an accountancy model of societal management where everything must be costed in order to be compared and preferably traded (*pace* Oscar Wilde). The same thinking can be found in the work of the thinker who first used the term “decroissance” (degrowth), André Gorz - Gorz, A. (2007, 2012). *La salida del capitalismo ya ha empezado ~ decrecimiento*. <http://www.decrecimiento.info/2012/01/la-salida-del-capitalismo-ya-ha.html> (online Spanish translation from the French original which appeared in *Herbert Marcuse, Michel Bosquet (Andre Gorz), Edward Morin, Sicco Mansholt et al.* First published in French by Le Nouvel Observateur, 1975). also see Gorz, A. (2010). *Critique of Economic Reason*. London: Verso. And Gorz, A. (2012). *Capitalism, socialism, ecology*. London: Verso.

her Limits to Growth team⁴⁴, climate science⁴⁵, and ecological economics⁴⁶) degrowth is well placed to make a critical contribution.

However, the “straws in the wind” noted above do not amount to a resolved change of direction. Overall Labour policy development still relies, at best, on a “green growth” logic, present even in the positive developments just enumerated. McDonnell, for example, combines statements about the Limits to Growth with an emphasis on better technology and investment in the green economy⁴⁷.

The above, “conjunctural”, analysis might suggest that Labour is in a kind of temporary unfrozen state where unorthodox, even iconoclastic, ideas can be voiced and taken seriously. But that will not last: Labour would consolidate its ideology as a new, if temporary, settlement, following a move into to government. That two stage picture is itself a simplification because within each of the two phases, pre-governmental and governmental, in different ways, there would be a multidimensional, ideological struggle.

In relation to degrowth, we can ask “why is it difficult for Labour people to accept what is the hard core of degrowth, the limits to growth thesis?”.

Answering that might give us clues about how best to present degrowth thinking in Labour circles. The sources of opposition and counter-arguments to degrowth are readily identified, and would appear to be the following⁴⁸,

- *Jobs*: It is growth that will deliver much needed jobs.
- *Poverty and deprivation*: We need growth to lift people out of poverty and deprivation.
- *Technological fix*: We can deal with the problems of growth by investing in smart technology.
- *Squaring the circle*: Growth as consistent with environmental protection: sustainable development or having our cake and eating it.

44 Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers, J., & Behrens, W. W. (1974). *The Limits to growth : a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind*. London: Pan Books. Retrieved from <http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf>

Meadows, D. H., Randers, J., & Meadows, D. L. (2005). *Limits to Growth : the 30-Year Update*. London: Earthscan.

45 e.g. Le Quéré, C., Andrew, R. M., Friedlingstein, P., Sitch, S., Pongratz, J., Manning, A. C., ... Zhu, D. (2018). Global Carbon Budget 2017. *Earth System Science Data*, 10(1), 405–448. <https://doi.org/10.5194/essd-10-405-2018>

46 Daly, H. E., & Farley, J. (2011). *Ecological economics : principles and applications*. Washington, D.C: Island Press.

Jackson, T. (2017). *Prosperity without growth: foundations for the economy of tomorrow* (Second Edition). London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Lange, S. (2018). *Macroeconomics without growth: sustainable economies in neoclassical, Keynesian and Marxian theories*. Marburg: Metropolis-Verlag.

Victor, P. A. (2008). *Managing without growth slower by design, not disaster*. Cheltenham; Northampton, Mass.: E. Elgar.

47 See the textual analysis of his speech in my earlier piece, Burton, M. (2018). Is the UK Labour party facing up to a post-growth future? As above.

48 Burton, M. (2018). *Is the UK Labour party facing up to a post-growth future?* as above.

- *Class*: The green movement is a middle class one that does not represent the interests of the working class.
- *“And the environment”*: Nature is seen as separate, secondary to human life, society and economy.
- *We can't isolate ourselves*: We live in a global world and we have to compete to survive.

Several of these blocks are not unique to the left, but the emphasis on jobs, poverty and deprivation, and class, are distinctive.

Degrowth thinkers have devoted many pages to debunking these ideas and also working up alternative policy frameworks⁴⁹ that are consistent with both the limits to growth and with the aims of social and economic justice. The challenge is how to make those positive degrowth ideas become hegemonic in Labour circles. To be honest, I don't have the answer to this. However, I suggest the following ideas:

1. Start from an understanding of the mental and emotional investment in the growth idea. The list above gives some clues to this.
2. Practice a kind of intellectual and emotional ju-jitsu: turn what is seen as positive in the growth narrative against it. So we know that investment in technical innovation tends to destroy jobs. We know that as capital accumulates (i.e. as growth takes place), divisions are exacerbated. We accept the point about the global exposure of local economies – but that means that globalisation has to be fought through a relative re-localisation of economies, rather than increasing the globalising tendencies. And that does not mean stopping being internationalists⁵⁰.
3. Seek demonstrations that degrowth principles do deliver social benefits. For example when local financial flows are captured and redirected to local benefit. This does not mean seeking perfect degrowth in an imperfect world, but rather seeking innovations that are compatible with degrowth and indicate the ways in which degrowth ideas could be implemented at scale.
4. Avoid being defensive. While it is important to work with people's values and preferences, that does not mean becoming apologetic or uncompromising about degrowth. It is “growthism” that is implausible, unscientific, not degrowth. So go on the offensive and, in good humour, ridicule the faulty thinking that sustains the growthist models. As Kallis

49 For two such lists, at different scales, and links to others, see Burton, M. (2018). *Is the UK Labour party facing up to a post-growth future?* as above.

50 Not that the dominant Labour tradition has been particularly internationalist in outlook.

argues⁵¹, “degrowth” is a positive term that disrupts orthodox approaches. New paradigms are always like that.

Conclusion

The socialist movement has multiple roots, many of which were closely associated with a rebellion against the domination of life by a set of practices and ideology that reduced everything to an “economic” rationality. Cloaked by that economic rationality was (is) the domination of the many by the few, the property owners. And with that economic rationality of domination goes the domination of nature, its pell-mell exploitation without regard to its regeneration and to the future. Moreover, this rationality involves the imperial exploitation of other peoples and regions.

In degrowth we can find all these concerns and we could imagine a natural, mutual sympathy with socialists and their allies, were it not for the adoption of many of the dominant assumptions, models and methods into the heart of the socialist and Labour movement. But perhaps, in these times of crisis (of hegemony, legitimacy and of imagination), when the thoughtful are seeking and exploring alternatives, then there is an appetite to consider the framework of degrowth while jettisoning the absurdity of endless growth on a finite planet. This article has suggested some ways this might be happening, in the context of the British Labour Party, although it is careful not to over-claim: Labour has a long way to go before it can be said to have a policy framework that is consistent with what we already know about limits, overshoot and the extremely dangerous place that the pursuit of growth has taken us all. Clues to finding that framework have been given, but the path to it will sooner or later have to be trodden by the party itself.

51 <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/youre-wrong-kate-degrowth-is-a-compelling-word/> Also see Latouche, who first popularised “decroissance” Latouche, S. (2010). *Farewell to Growth*. Polity Press.