

Degrowth at a Crossroads

Article by Seán Fearon

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Held in the EU Parliament from May 15 to 17, the Beyond Growth conference was in many ways a watershed for the burgeoning degrowth movement. But increased visibility comes with the risk of co-optation, argues post-growth scholar Seán Fearon.

Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, made her way to the podium. The hemicycle was brewing with hushed excitement. The opening speech of the opening day of the largest-ever gathering of Europe's degrowth community was about to get underway.

Metsola paced through advertisements for the European Commission's Green Deal and climate neutrality targets, and spoke of the power of the EU to lead and transform. She did not engage with the dire nature of the planetary crisis known to the audience sitting increasingly restless in front of her, comprised largely of activists, academics, and journalists. The anticipated radicalism of the conference, in stark contrast to its setting within the main chamber of the Parliament, had not yet materialised, but it was early. Then arrived a tipping point. Metsola claimed that Europe's climate objectives are not "only about going green for green's sake", but about growth.

A pause of silent disbelief came over the conference attendees. It was quickly followed by disappointment. Had this conference not been labelled the "Woodstock of Degrowth"? This was the opening speech. Were attendees anticipating this Woodstock's "Hendrix moment" – economic anthropologist [Jason Hickel](#)'s contribution some fifteen minutes later – now listening to Ed Sheeran?

This inauspicious start to Beyond Growth by no means defined the conference. As an attendee, I reveled, with others, in three days of stirring contributions steeped in conviction, a searing intellectual confidence, and palpable urgency. These are the hallmarks of a community of activists and academics who are rapidly developing popular, evidence-based, and anti-capitalist responses to a hegemonic growth orthodoxy hurtling human societies towards planetary disaster.

But Metsola's keynote speech certainly revealed a contrast between the thought leaders of the degrowth community and their hosts in the EU institutions. Several panels offered the spectacle of degrowthers placing the responsibility for planetary crisis at the feet of Europe's growth vanguard, only to be directly followed by calls for "green growth" from some European Commissioner or another. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of these institutional contributions were pre-recorded video messages. For the contributions of EU representatives that attended in person were often denounced as dangerous fairytales by post-growth economists and political ecologists.

At a session billed as an exploration of how we must develop post-growth economic policy indicators to replace GDP, the panel opened with speeches from the OECD, the United Nations, the Commission, and the European Central Bank detailing how GDP or some measure of national income will remain a part of their indicator frameworks. For the degrowth community this is not just an incongruence or contradiction to be rebuffed. It is evidence of institutions who refuse to acknowledge ecological limits and

who continue to reinforce the barricades of the growth orthodoxy at the expense of human life and planetary stability. The two post-growth panelists waited until the opening salvo subsided.

This conference of contrasts was probably best captured during a debate on post-growth industrial policy. Mathias Miedreich, CEO of multinational mining giant Umicore sat on the panel next to chemist and environmental activist Prof. Michael Braungart. As it turns out, Prof. Braungart once occupied Umicore offices in protest of its mining operations. When this was revealed by the session moderator, Miedreich commented, “now you tell me”.

In spite of its contrasts, Beyond Growth appeared to be a watershed. For many who had attended the first, much smaller and quieter conference five years ago, Beyond Growth was evidence of a burgeoning movement in full voice. It demonstrated the movement’s newfound scale, and perhaps even power. It is a community imbued with the energy of paradigm-shifting ideas and the fearless radicalism of youth engaged in struggle for a habitable planet. For those unfamiliar with degrowth and its proponents, it will have revealed a movement unafraid to directly challenge the most cherished beliefs of the economic establishment.

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And yet, Beyond Growth might also represent the first step in the gradual co-option of now popular post-growth ideas by this establishment. Why else would Commissioners, Directors-General and OECD representatives attend a degrowth conference to make the case for continued economic growth? In the positive energy of the Beyond Growth aftermath, there should be pause for strategic caution.

From speaking to attendees and panel participants, there exists a kernel of strategic incoherence. Some see this as an opportunity to influence and inculcate post-growth ideas into the policy infrastructure of the infamously undemocratic European Commission – much discussion focused on the improbable reconfiguring the EU’s Stability and Growth Pact as a Sustainability and Wellbeing Pact. Much less time was devoted to, for example, harnessing the power of trade unions and working class communities to build political force behind post-growth ideas. One need not look further than the way in which institutional representatives were able to conflate the title of the conference with their own economic orthodoxy. Their very attendance is seen by some as evidence of gradual progress, but this progress might turn out to be depoliticisation in disguise.

All signs point to a movement whose time may be arriving in many, but certainly not all, influential policy and academic circles. This would not have been possible were it not for the decades of pioneering work by those who have slowly reshaped the discipline of economics, whose mainstream arrogance must now yield to ecological reality.

The question now is one of agency. Scarce and essential political energy should not be squandered on the altar of advocacy. Beyond Growth showed a conspicuous lack of resistance from its institutional

hosts. Much more apparent were attempts by these hosts to place the mantra of growth in the same company as those who diagnose this mantra as the primary cause of crises and disaster. Degrowth as a movement has the ideas, it has a righteous confidence powered by the desire to fight for humanity. It now needs political power, and this will not be found in the snaking corridors of the Parliament.

Seán Fearon is a PhD researcher at Queen's University Belfast, working in the area of post-growth macroeconomics. His thesis research focuses on the development of an ecological economic indicator set to measure the transition of an economy to a post-growth position. He has published peer-reviewed work on post-growth political economy in Ireland, and an assessment of just energy and employment transitions.

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