

Degrowth in Canada: Critical perspectives from the ground

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Guelph, 2015

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the School of Environmental Studies

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University of Victoria

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Abstract:

Degrowth is an emerging field of research and a social movement founded on the premise that perpetual economic growth is incompatible with the biophysical limits of our finite planet (D’Alisa, Demaria & Kallis, 2014a; Asara, Otero, Demaria & Corbera, 2015). Despite the important work that degrowth scholars and activists have done to broadcast the fundamental contradiction between endless compound growth and a finite resource base, degrowth remains politically marginal, having received little mainstream attention or policy uptake. This thesis explores why. In particular, I examine barriers to and pathways towards the uptake of degrowth in Canada, a country that disproportionately contributes to climate breakdown. To do so I ask: 1) What barriers exist to advancing a degrowth agenda in Canada?; 2) How specifically do those barriers block degrowth from taking hold in contemporary Canadian policy and political discourse?; 3) How (if at all) are Canadian activists seeking to address these barriers?

This research reveals that the political economy in Canada, and the way that is expressed in concentrations of elite and corporate power has given certain actors, particularly the fossil fuel industry, immense economic and political power. These concentrations of power, and the ways they are maintained reinforce a politics and discourse that is highly antithetical to the politics of degrowth, and thus serve as a major barrier to the emergence of degrowth. I argue, in order to move towards a degrowth politics, the hegemony of fossil capitalism in Canada, and the specific class interests that support it needs to be challenged. While degrowth has a strong critique of economic growth and capitalism, this alone is not enough. Any movement towards degrowth will require transforming power relations. This means continuing to explore the concrete ways specific institutions continue to create the political economic conditions that support fossil fueled growth as its main priority, and prioritizing building broad based movements to counter them.

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Keywords:

degrowth, neoliberalism, environmentalism, social movement, climate breakdown

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CAPP	Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers
CEAA	Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency
ENGO	Environmental non-governmental organization
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GDP	Gross domestic product
GHG	Greenhouse gas
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	Non-governmental organization
TsX	Toronto stock exchange

Territory Acknowledgment

It is with great respect that I acknowledge that this thesis was written on the territories of the Lekwungen-speaking peoples, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day. The process of writing this thesis is deeply connected to this place and to these lands. Being on these beautiful lands has transformed my understanding of what it means to be of Settler-Ancestry, and in turn greatly shaped this research. I make this acknowledgment as part of my commitment to supporting anti-colonial and decolonial struggle, and to continue to learn, unlearn and transform the relationships to the land and people where I live.

Acknowledgments

First, thank you to all of my interviewees who offered up their time and wisdom and support for me and my work. I learnt so much from all of my conversations, and speaking to you only furthered my commitment to fighting the good fight, as you all already are.

James, thank you for all of your support, for your many rounds of revisions and patience throughout and for giving me so much freedom to explore the issues I care about. As well, thank you Kara, for your deep engagement with my work. The combined support I received brought my writing and this work far beyond what I expected of myself.

This work was also aided by the support and encouragement of the School of Environmental Studies. How lucky am I to have been a part of such a wonderful community of such kind, thoughtful and dedicated people committed to addressing some of today's most pressing challenges! Thank you for all of the learning, advice, chats, laughs and snacks along the way. To Ana Maria, and Anita for your mentorship, encouragement over these past years, and for being such incredible role models. To my cohort, team gin- what a ride we went on together! I am so thankful to count you all as friends. I have learnt so much from all of you and am excited to see all of the wonderful things you will get up to in the coming years! To my fellow political ecologists- Catriona, Charlie, Dana, Drew, Emilia, Emily, Erin, and Kim, I could not have done it without you! Thank you thank you for all of the long deep chats, interwoven with office dance breaks. Your different commitments to social and climate justice are a constant source of inspiration.

Getting this thesis complete has been quite journey. Grad school is somehow simultaneously the Candy Land in Willy Wonka where all your wildest dreams seem possible, and also a big dumpster fire on a very hot day that emits all of the smells and CO2 emissions, and probably a few things that are toxic if ingested in significant quantities. Navigating this would not be possible without the unwavering support of so many family and friends.

Gillian, Dana and Emilia what a special gift our friendship is! You all were the chocolate river, the everlasting gobstoppers and Jean Wilder singing Pure Imagination in my grad school experience. Sarah thank you for your support over this past year, our check-ins were what got me to the end! To Maria, mi alma gemela, for helping me decide to go to grad school in the first place, and for making me laugh and look on the bright side all the way through. Claire, Kate, Steph, Jo, and Brynna, thank you for endless encouragement, unconditional love and support and for always believing the best in me! Love you all! And my family- I am so lucky to have been born into a such remarkable group of people doing such cool things out in the World. Thank you for nurturing the stubborn belief I hold that the World can and ought to be better than it is. Mom, Dad, Mark and Sophie, thank you for showering me in so much love and support throughout this process!

This research was also made possible by the funding from the University of Victoria and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Dedication

To my magnificent mother and grandmothers.

Chapter 1- Introduction

Objective and research questions

There is now clear evidence of impending ecological breakdown. Modern, industrial society has placed unprecedented pressure on the biophysical systems that life depends upon. Already, a number of critical biophysical boundaries have been crossed including climate change (Steffen et al., 2015). Global temperatures continue to rise, and on the current trajectory we are on track to reach approximately 4°C of warming by 2100 (Morgan & Fullbrook, 2019; Raworth, 2017). According to climate scientist James Hansen (2010), this would represent a “dynamic situation that is out of (human) control... thought by scientists to portend the end of civilization in the sense of organized human society” (p.69 as cited in Foster, 2017).

Getting serious about climate breakdown¹ and connected ecological degradation requires naming and understanding the root causes of the problem. Increasingly, critical scholarship has highlighted the disconnect between the global capitalist economy with its inherent need for economic growth and expansion and the demand this places on biophysical systems (see McAfee, 2012; Simms, 2009; Klein, 2014; Parr, 2014; Fong, 2017; Paddison, 2018). There is now a burgeoning literature teasing out the relationship between growth-based capitalism and ecological degradation, while also pointing to alternatives (see Huber, 2013; Mitchell, 2011; Malm, 2016; McMichael, 2009; Klein, 2014; Moore, 2015; Harvey 2014).

The emergence of transition discourses championing socio-economic alternatives to neoliberal capitalism is a sign of the crises we are facing, and each discourse offers a critical

¹ This thesis, inspired by climate activist Greta Thunberg, uses the language of climate breakdown, except when quoting someone, or in reference to a specific policy. This is opposed to climate change, to reflect an understanding that this is a more accurate description of the global situation.

pathway out of the systems and relations that have produced the crisis (Escobar, 2015). It is within this increasingly dire context that degrowth has emerged as an evolving constellation of thought, a social movement, and a field of academic inquiry that is beginning to exert worldwide intellectual influence. Degrowth is founded on the basic premise that perpetual economic growth is incompatible with the biophysical limits of a finite planet (D'Alisa, Demaria & Kallis, 2014a; Asara, Otero, Demaria & Corbera, 2015). Prominent degrowth scholar Giorgos Kallis (2011) views degrowth as an ecological-economic perspective that leads to a socially sustainable and equitable reduction and stabilization of the global use of energy and materials of the global economy.

Degrowth proponents recognize that the drivers of the global ecological crisis are tied to a political and economic crisis that requires deep and wide scale transformations of how societies are organized. They advocate for a world beyond economism—the pervasive ideology that assigns economic values as the primary measure governing societal relations—to one driven by a different set of values that prioritize the wellbeing of people and the planet (Martinez-Alier, 2012). As a result, degrowth scholars have launched a field of study exploring and searching for “more just and sustainable futures” that replace those imposed by the current economy (Paulson, 2017, p.426; Cattaneo, D’Alisa, Kallis, & Zografos, 2012). Proponents of degrowth highlight that degrowth does not refer to negative growth, but rather stands for a departure from the entrenched objective of growth for the sake of growth, which underpins the dominant capitalist system (Latouche, 2009; Hickel, 2019).

Key to the degrowth research agenda is “imagining and enacting alternative visions to modern growth-based development” (Kallis, 2015, p.1). The degrowth literature actively investigates proposals, policy ideas and solutions that could be in line with and bring about a

society beyond growth, built on foundations of care, inclusion, sustainability and wellbeing (Kallis, 2015). Policy ideas that are supported across the degrowth literature include: major shifts in labour including reduction in overall work hours, a universal basic income, universal healthcare, free post-secondary education, maximum salary caps, strong redistributive policies, and reform of financial institutions (Kallis, 2011; Raventós, 2007; D’Alisa et al., 2014a). There is strong support for and emphasis on relocalization and on community-led grassroots projects including eco-communities, cooperatives, urban gardens, local currencies, re-commoning land, community spaces such as gardens, public squares, green spaces, community owned renewable energy projects- as examples and pathways towards degrowth (Kallis, Kerschner & Martinez-Alier, 2012; Kallis, 2011). Degrowth policy proposals also recommend restrictions on the financialization of the global economy, and call for increased barriers and limits on international flows of capital, speculative finance, tax havens, bank lending, and commodity trading (D’Alisa et al., 2014a).

Degrowth proponents stress that degrowth does not amount to a ready-made system, but is best conceived as visionary guidelines for communities (Jackson, 2015). This is reflected in the Degrowth Declaration Barcelona (2010), which emerged out of the 2nd International Degrowth Conference and states: “we do not claim to have a recipe for the future, but we can no longer pretend that we can keep growing as if nothing has happened... the challenge now is how to transform, and the debate has just begun.” (Degrowth Declaration Barcelona, 2010). Degrowth alternatives draw upon a wide array of pre-existing and proposed social arrangements such as cooperatives, eco-communes, urban gardens, decentralized renewable energy schemes, community currencies, barter markets, and public health, elder and child care (Videira, Schneider, Sekulova & Kallis, 2014).

Degrowth literatures have articulated that shrinking the global throughput of the economy is required to maintain a livable climate, and ecological system, and highlights the policy changes and programs that are part of this transition. There is, however, a gap in the degrowth literature regarding how to popularize a concept that is yet to enter the mainstream discourse. As Schindler (2016) observes: “degrowth has hitherto had little purchase beyond activist and academic circles, because needless to say politicians do not win elections on platforms of scaling back consumption and shrinking the economy” (p.823). Even the transformative Green New Deal initiative recently proposed by the Sunrise Movement and Justice Democrats in the United States does not challenge capitalism’s sacrosanct growth logic. In Canada, the federal government remains attached to economic growth, as evidenced by the its current climate plan: The Pan Canadian Framework for Clean Growth and Climate Change. With this in mind, this thesis explores the barriers to, and pathways towards degrowth, with a particular focus on Canada. Canada is a particularly needed site for degrowth policies as the average Canadian produces 22 tons of Greenhouse gases (GHG) per year. This makes Canada the highest per capita GHG emitter among all of the G20, “who as a group is responsible for more than 80 per cent of the world’s annual greenhouse gas emissions” (Rabson, 2018b). And yet degrowth has had very little mainstream policy traction in Canada.

A central question I address in this thesis is: how do we advance degrowth in Canada’s current political climate where securing economic growth remains entrenched as a necessary requirement and non-negotiable objective of powerful concentrations of power such as Canadian governments and corporations? To date, much of the work on degrowth has comprised the critical work of building the normative case for the necessity of degrowth (Koch, Buch-Hansen

& Fritz, 2017). There remains a gap in the literature in our understanding of how to politically mobilize around the solutions degrowth proposes, and to make them a reality on the ground.

To this end, I ask the following questions:

- 1) What barriers exist to advancing a degrowth agenda in Canada?
- 2) How specifically do those barriers block degrowth from taking hold in contemporary policy and political discourse in Canada?
- 3) How (if at all) are contemporary Canadian activists seeking to address these barriers?

The practical aim of this thesis is to identify and critically assess the challenges raised by activists and practitioners working in Canada on various initiatives that fall under the broad umbrella of degrowth. The thesis focuses on activist understandings of these challenges because activists offer a distinctive lens on these questions due to their proximity to the political terrain. This is compared to degrowth scholars who might be less bound by political context and constraints when developing their critiques and proposals. Since activists are situated within and seeking to change specific political contexts, their understandings of barriers are uniquely grounded in, and potentially revealing of aspects of, challenges that might otherwise be difficult to ascertain. As such, activist knowledge holds critical lessons for understanding and acting to bring about social change (Choudry, 2015). This research seeks to understand how activist knowledge can bolster the degrowth literature and help to address the political unacceptability that degrowth policies and proposals are currently facing. Below I review the literature on degrowth before turning to my research methodology.

Literature review: Foundations of degrowth thought

The literature on degrowth is expansive, and draws upon diverse streams of thought including, but not limited to: ecological economics, political ecology, feminist theory and

economics, and post development theory (Waring, & Steinem, 1988; Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova & Martinez-Alier, 2013; Escobar, 2015; Martinez-Alier, 2012). Degrowth is premised on the assumption that the ecological crisis is also a crisis of capitalism, of economics, and of politics (Demaria et al., 2013). Addressing these interconnected crises thus requires stepping outside of existing institutional boundaries towards new and transformative ways of organizing societies that are geared towards an equitable and just reduction in the energy used in the economy. Leading degrowth proponents advocate that there is no single definition for degrowth, but rather that:

Degrowth offers a frame that connects diverse ideas, concepts and proposals. However, there are some centres of gravity within this frame. The first is the criticism of growth. Next is the criticism of capitalism, a social system that requires and perpetuates growth (D’Alisa et al., 2014a, p.xxi).

There have been over 100 papers published on degrowth since 2008, with special issues in journals on technology for degrowth, urban planning and housing policy for degrowth, and democracy (Kerschner, Wächter, Nierling & Ehlers, 2018; Nelson & Schneider, 2018; Cattaneo et al., 2012). Degrowth has also been written about in influential international media such as *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Financial Times* (Cosme, Santos & O’Neill, 2017; Demaria et al., 2013).

Conferences have been held bi-annually since 2008, and have been fundamental in growing the field, sharing ideas, and building networks across academic disciplines, and with civil society groups. To date conferences have been held in: Barcelona in 2010, Montreal and Venice in 2012, Leipzig in 2014, Budapest in 2016, and Malmö, Brussels and Mexico City in 2018. These conferences have been critical spaces for clarifying and strengthening the concept

and building a movement of degrowth.² The initial concept of degrowth was strongly rooted in the work of ecological economics, and focused narrowly around reducing the energy throughput of the economy in the Global North. This has been expanded to recognize that while there must be a reduction, it also presents an opportunity to transform societies away from the individualistic values ascribed under capitalism to those rooted in justice, wellbeing and conviviality (Muraca, 2013). There has also been the recognition that for the movement to move beyond academia, it must form alliances and join with other ongoing social movements (Schmelzer, 2017). This has led to the emergence of literature on the potential of a degrowth perspective within other justice and environmental movements including: environmental justice (Martinez-Alier, 2012), post-development (Escobar, 2015), feminism (Perkins, 2010), la Via Campesina (Paulson, 2017), the pluriverse (Kothari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria, & Acosta, 2018) and Buen Vivir (Kothari, Demaria & Acosta, 2014; Thomson, 2011).

Below I review the core pillars of degrowth thought and literature including: critiques of economic growth, critiques of capitalism, repoliticization and democracy, and degrowth and transitions. This review is meant to introduce the diverse streams of thought that guide the degrowth project while also demonstrating that the question of political uptake central to this thesis remains largely unanswered within the degrowth literature.

Critiques of economic growth.

According to Kallis, Demaria & D'Alisa (2015): “degrowth signifies first and foremost a critique of growth” (p. 4). Degrowth understands the current ecological crises along with the financial, and social crises of poverty and inequality as rooted in the growth fetishism that is

² An overview of conference proceedings can be found at: <https://degrowth.org/conferences>

central to global capitalism (Dengler & Seebacher, 2018). Schmelzer (2016) has made important contributions to understanding the “quasi-religious adoration of growth by economists and policy-makers” (p.263). In *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the making of the economic growth paradigm*, Schmelzer (2016) explores how economic growth emerged as an ideology and as the primary goal of policy making, as well as how this has come to shape the political imaginary of governments and their perceived role in society. Likewise, degrowth proponents question the use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a now hegemonic measure of governments, and argue that it is an inadequate measure for progress, and that it has not resulted in the emancipatory project that many contended it to be. They further highlight it has not brought about substantial reductions in poverty, or translated into improvements in human wellbeing (Schmelzer, 2015; Dietz & O’Neill, 2013; Jackson, 2009; Victor, 2008; Koch, 2018).

As Fournier (2008) notes, summarizing degrowth advocates’ perspective on GDP:

...(it) only takes into account the production and sale of commodified goods and services, ignoring the damaging effects these have on other ‘goods’: justice, equality, democracy, human and ecosystems’ health, quality and life, social relations. They point to the absurdity of an economic system based on growth when what it means to grow remains arbitrary (p. 531).

Furthermore, degrowth proponents draw on arguments made by feminist economists for decades, critiquing the arbitrary nature of GDP, which fails to account for the critical care work and reproductive labour that is predominantly performed by women (Demaria et al., 2013). This care work is fundamental to support the emotional, physical, and mental wellbeing of everybody. The total hours spent doing care work is more than all waged labour, yet remains outside of and thus is inadequately valued in the formal economy (D’Alisa, Deriu & Demaria, 2014b). Proponents highlight that undoing the growth imperative is an opportunity to re-imagine and expand the collective understanding of human identity beyond those captured by dominant economic

representations. Instead they call to more deeply prioritize and value wellbeing, health, care, reciprocity, conviviality as the basis of how societies are organized, not as something to be fit into the increasingly limited time people have outside of waged labour (D'Alisa et al., 2014a).

Critiques of economic growth also draw heavily on the field of ecological economics, which highlights the relationship between ecological degradation and economic growth. As a field, ecological economics strives to understand the human economy as a system embedded within the finite and limited biophysical planet (Klitgaard & Krall, 2012; Van den Bergh, 2001). Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's seminal work analyzing energy flows and resource inputs in the economy is one of the primary intellectual inspirations for contemporary degrowth scholarship (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Martinez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien & Zaccai, 2010). This research articulates the argument for why economic growth is incompatible with a finite planet. They highlight that to maintain a 'healthy' capitalist economy at a three percent growth rate annually, the economy would double in size in just 24 years (Hickel, 2018). This would represent alarming challenges given the current state of ecological systems, where current levels of production and consumption globally overshoot the regenerative capacity of the planet by about 50% each year (Salleh, 2016). While the mainstream argument is that there is the possibility to decouple emissions growth from economic growth, there remains no evidence that this absolute decoupling is possible (Ward, Sutton, Werner, Costanza, Mohr & Simmons, 2016). Research to date illustrates that while there are ways to grow the economy that are less resource intensive, and less ecologically damaging, increases in economic growth requires production and consumption, which further requires energy and inputs. This, Bonaiuti states is because:

...this continual racing ahead does not escape the laws of thermodynamics: a new product is nothing but a 'new combination of matter/ energy/ information and thus its production involves not only the irreversible degradation of a certain amount of energy but also the

'loss' of a certain amount of available matter, which in actual fact cannot be recycled at the end of the process (2012, p. 528).

Critiques of capitalism.

A growing number of degrowth scholars are emphasizing that moving past a growth economy requires moving past capitalism, since capitalism necessitates growth to function (Kallis & March, 2015; Paulson, 2017; Bauhardt, 2014; Klitgaard, 2013, Foster, 2011). A survey conducted by Matthias Schmelzer and Dennis Eversberg of attendees at the 2014 International Degrowth Conference in Leipzig, found that participants were united by a "consensual support for universalist, feminist, grassroots, democratic and *anti-capitalist* ideas" (2017; p.327, emphasis added). This observation is reflected in arguments such as these made regularly by degrowth scholars:

Degrowth is radical because it wants the end of capitalism. By singling out economic growth as the cause of ecological and social misery, degrowth blames the inner workings and logics of capitalism, since economic growth is the single mechanism that holds the capitalist economic system together. Consequently, any policy or movement that aims to halt growth is incompatible with capitalism, since capitalism with no growth is simply an oxymoron (Boonstra & Joosse, 2013, p.172).

As such, there is a growing literature within degrowth that establishes the ways in which degrowth is counter to the norms, structures and relations entrenched under capitalism. For degrowth to emerge, a number of analysts argue, it must be tied to a post-capitalist economy operating with a very different set of institutions and social and economic relations (Kish & Quilley, 2017; Brand, 2016; Markantonatou, 2016; Beling, Vanhulst, Demaria, Rabi, Carballo & Pelenc, 2018).

In response to these important contributions, a more recent current within the degrowth literature argues that moving beyond growth requires a transformation not only of economic theories of growth, but also the institutional structures that produce systematic lock ins towards

growth and the concentrations of capital (van Griethuyesen, 2010; Koch, 2015; Johannisova & Wolf, 2012; Joutsenvirta, 2016; Klitgaard, 2013). Furthermore, degrowth literatures have addressed the incompatibility of capitalist institutions such as the market-based economy (Fotopoulos, 2010a; Boillat, Gerber & Funes-Monzote, 2012), property rights (van Griethuyesen, 2010), banking (Gerber, 2015), and money (Hornborg, 2017; Douthwaite, 2012) with degrowth. This has critical implications for the pathways towards degrowth. A pressing question that emerges from this literature is how to bring about these required deep institutional changes when degrowth remains so removed from the mainstream and politically marginal (Van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012; Demaria et al., 2013; Buch-Hansen, 2014).

Degrowth, repoliticization and democracy.

Degrowth proponents argue that core to their project is affirming and expanding democracy. There is recognition within the literature that degrowth is tied to a more expansive understandings and practices of democracy, where increasing domains enter under democratic control, and at more local scales. This stream of literature on democracy and degrowth draws upon academic critiques of post-politics and depoliticization (Cattaneo et al., 2012). Critical scholars argue that life under neoliberal capitalism is marked by a post-political condition where, in the name of efficiency, what were once political issues have become the domain of economics and accordingly removed from democratic deliberation (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2011; Brown 2015). There is a specific focus within the literature on neoliberal climate governance as an example of this limiting of democracy (Kenis, & Lievens, 2014). There are few opportunities to engage with and actively play a role in shaping our responses to the climate and ecological crises (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). Instead, the role of technical managers and economists- the “experts” - is to establish the right market signals, while life for

the rest of us can go on unchanged (Swyngedouw, 2011; Brand, 2010). Degrowth aims to repoliticize and expand understandings of democracy, emphasizing that a true democracy would be sensitive to citizen demands for a healthy environment, and would operate on rules of justice for all (Deriu, 2012). According to Deriu: "...to rethink democracy with a view to degrowth means affirming that a truly democratic system does not degrade living conditions nor, therefore, deprive future generations the same possibilities of choice and political freedom we have today," (2012, p.556). The literatures on degrowth and democracy explore different forms of democracy that would be conducive to degrowth (Asara, Profumi & Kallis, 2013). This includes literature on direct and inclusive democracy (Fotopoulos, 2010b), participatory democracy (Bayon, Flipo & Schneider, 2010; Latouche, 2009), deliberative democracy (Ott, 2012), real democracy (Romano, 2012), and representative democracy (Fournier, 2008).

Degrowth and transformations.

The degrowth current that is most pertinent to this research project is the debate and literature on what is required for a societal transformation to degrowth. This area of research has been recognized as under-studied. For example, Maria Joutsenvirta writes that: "Degrowth debate is suffering from a wide gap that exists between its radical, normative, ideas and analysis about how to bring these ideas from outside the cultural norm into mainstream thinking and practices," (2016, p.23). More recently, the call for an increased focus on strategies towards degrowth has emerged as an important outcome of the Malmö Conference on Degrowth, held in August 2018. Here participants observed how "...there seems to exist a gap in the degrowth discourse around the question of *how* to move towards a degrowth society," (Herbert, Barlow, Frey, Ambach & Cigna, 2018). New work is beginning to address this 'how' question within degrowth (Joutsenvirta, 2016; Buch Hansen, 2018; Vandeventer, Cattaneo & Zografos, 2019).

My thesis is situated within this recent current. Below I briefly review the work of three scholars who have made important contributions to this “how” question. Specifically, I clarify the insights that best help to answer my research questions.

In “A practice approach to the institutionalization of economic degrowth” (2016), Maria Joutsenvirta brings a sociological perspective to look at how institutions can serve as a barrier to radical change, such as degrowth, and uses Finnish time banking as an example of system lock-in. This practice approach she outlines is a way of looking at how institutions can serve as a barrier to radical change, such as degrowth. This approach, she argues, “increases our understanding of institutional persistence and makes visible forces that support the present ‘status quo.’ It also enhances understandings of the opposing dynamics and gives tools to engage in more effective efforts to change institutions,” (p.23). This is a useful case study that highlights the powerful forces and institutions blocking progress on degrowth. For Joutsenvirta, degrowth has to date been insufficiently attentive to these barriers - a topic that will be returned to in greater detail in chapter 2 of this thesis.

In “Civil and Uncivil Actors for a Degrowth Society” (2013) D’Alisa, Demaria, & Cattaneo focus on the different forms of activism that can support degrowth. They delineate between groups they label “civil” - those working within institutional boundaries to create more reform-oriented change - and “uncivil actors” who work outside of the system in a more radical way to challenge the authority and legitimacy of the capitalist system. D’Alisa et al. emphasize how both forms of activism can “contribute to the construction of a new degrowth society,” (p.212). Their paper offers important insights into how reform efforts can support a more radical transition to degrowth - a theme I take up further in chapter three.

Lastly, in “The prerequisites for a degrowth paradigm shift: Insights from critical political economy,” (2018) Hubert Buch Hansen identifies four prerequisites that are required for an effective degrowth transition. These are: “deep crisis, an alternative political project, a comprehensive coalition of social forces promoting the project in a political struggle and broad-based consent,” (p.157). He finds that while currently there is evidence of a deep crisis, and degrowth does represent an alternative project, it lacks the third and fourth prerequisites. He writes: “The prospects for a degrowth paradigm shift remain bleak: unlike political projects that became hegemonic in the past, degrowth has neither support from a comprehensive coalition of social forces nor any consent to its agenda among the broader population” (p.157). Buch Hansen’s pessimistic findings resonate with my interview data. Those working on the ground, however, are working to address these limitations in ways that degrowth analysts can learn from.

Methods and methodology

Research methodologies.

Political ecology

I first came across degrowth as a field through my research and interest in political ecology, which I draw on as a critical lens for approaching this project. Political ecology as a field of study has been critical in unpacking the power relations and structures of capitalism that shape human appropriations of ecological systems (Leff, 2012). Political ecology examines the political, cultural, and economic histories and contexts that drive environmental problems. While there is no single definition of political ecology, it is a normative lens that explores the power relations between society and nature that shape how we understand and make use of our ecologies. A tenet of political ecology is that the ways in which we have come to understand our environment and what counts as knowledge about our environment, is highly contested and

political. Political ecology looks to challenge the underlying assumptions of how environmental problems are constructed, and the types of solutions that are employed to address them.

Furthermore, political ecology, particularly feminist political ecology, recognizes that “most often, so called ‘minorities’ by gender, race, class, and ethnicity are unfairly disadvantaged in the face of restricting political economies and climate extremes” (Buechler & Hanson, 2015, p.4).

Political ecology locates ecological degradation “at the crossroads of multiple relations of power” (Paulson, 2014, p.47). It draws on critical fields of study- sociology, anthropology, political economy etc., that analyze systems of power. These critical lenses are applied to understand ecological degradation, which is often considered a-politically when studied from a natural science perspective. Political ecology analysis moves beyond this, to analyze the axes of power that set the conditions for this ecological degradation to take place, understanding that anthropogenic ecological degradation is not apolitical, but rather a consequence of human activities, which are shaped and conditioned by social, political and economic structures.

Movement Relevant Theory

My research is also informed by what Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon (2005) describe as ‘movement relevant theory.’ This methodology is situated within the field of social movement theory and calls for an approach to research that puts the needs of social movements at its core. Movement relevant theory has been developed with the understanding that much of the work and writing in academia on social movements is not readily used, or useful to those on the ground directly involved in social movements. The goal of research using this methodology is to pursue “useable knowledge for those seeking social change,” (Flacks, 2004, p.138). One of the objectives is to produce more than just case studies and histories of social movements, but rather, useful and applicable knowledge (Bevington & Dixon, 2005). This means that engaged

researchers must identify, and be highly aware of their own biases, and be guided by an imperative to produce the most accurate and potentially useful information—even if this requires strong criticism and challenges to current movement norms (Bevington & Dixon, 2005).

This methodology fits nicely with the transformative goals of degrowth, and with my own involvement in social and environmental movements, including most recently the fossil fuel divestment movement, and the campaign against the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion. There is much to be learned about how to operationalize degrowth from those actively engaged in struggle. Activists have a proximity to the political realm - with both its barriers and openings - that scholars working primarily in academic institutions sometimes lack. This is why I have prioritized direct engagement with activists through semi-structured interviews. The premise guiding these interviews is that activist knowledge can help to address the operationalization gap within the degrowth literature.

Research methods.

There is currently not a robust degrowth movement in North America. Indeed, an important component of this project was to uncover why a cohesive challenge to fossil fueled growth in Canada remains marginal. Ideas that fit within a degrowth frame are being taken up by activists and actors working largely through organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGO) across North America in different ways; the movement is not centralized. As such, I chose to interview across a broad spectrum of environmental organizations – i.e. those who explicitly use the term degrowth; those who share a similar paradigm or elements of those advocated by degrowth; those whose values align with degrowth, but who operate outside of the discourse of degrowth; and those whose outreach and activities might not align explicitly with that goal in mind. My objective was to cast a wide net to gain an understanding of the landscape

of organizing in Canada more broadly, and to examine the state of debate about transitions and alternative economics. This was done also to investigate why certain actors and organizations may be hesitant to embrace degrowth, and for what reasons.

Before conducting interviews or seeking participants, I received approval from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (Protocol Number 17-315). Participant recruitment was initially carried out over email after composing a list of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) and grassroots organizations that met my criteria based on their online content and presence. I then sent introductory emails that outlined my research project and aims, and interviews followed with those who shared an interest in participating. I also used snowball sampling methods in my interviews to expand my sampling beyond what was available online. In total, I interviewed 14 people from across Canada working in different capacities to build and advocate for alternative economic systems in order to address the ecological crises, including climate breakdown. I conducted hour-long semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) to learn how individuals and groups are negotiating a political terrain that is shaped by massive power imbalances, with those in power generally opposed to transformative visions for the economy. The interview questions were organized in themes to explore: 1) general information about the organization or individual's work, 2) perspectives on degrowth 3) barriers and 4) pathways.

My interview subjects work in diverse areas of environmental research, advocacy, and activism in government, ENGOS, grassroots groups, and journalism. The interviewees come from across Canada, including three from Ontario, two from Saskatchewan, one from Nova Scotia, one from Quebec, and seven from British Columbia. Among those included were: a) those working in some capacity around degrowth, b) those who shared similar critiques and ideas

put forward by degrowth without using the same language, and c) those working in a more reformist, green growth approach. Research participants (table 1) who did not request anonymity include: Jody Chan from the Leap; Devlin Fernandes from Ecotrust Canada; Bob Thomson, who organizes under Degrowth Canada; Mike Wilson of the Smart Prosperity Institute; Mark Bigland-Pritchard and Rachel Malena-Chan of Climate Justice Saskatoon; Michelle Molnar, who works at the David Suzuki Foundation; Chelsea Fougere who organizes with Solidarity Halifax; Bill Rees, an ecological economist and co-founder of the One Earth, Ben Isitt, a current Victoria City Councillor; Guy Dauncey, an author and organizer; Richard Swift, a journalist, author and activist, and Harjap Grewal, a long-time community organizer. There was one additional interviewee who wished to remain anonymous. The interviews were transcribed and then coded for prominent themes.

I read widely when researching this thesis. I engaged not only the degrowth literature, but also broader work on neoliberal capitalism and the constraints it places on contemporary social change efforts. While this thesis is primarily an effort to harness activist knowledge to address the operationalization gap within degrowth, I also engage relevant academic literatures (mainly political ecology and critical political economy) that have contributions to make to the question of how to pursue degrowth under inhospitable political circumstances. In the chapters that follow I augment my interview findings with resonant results from my literature reviews, integrating on-the-ground knowledge with relevant academic knowledge that speaks to my three research questions.

Table 1- Research participants and backgrounds

Interviewee and Affiliation	Individual background and/or organization work focus
Jody Chan- The Leap	<p>-Jody Chan is the Organizing Coordinator for The Leap</p> <p>-The Leap organization grew out of the Leap Manifesto that sought to create a radical people powered vision in Canada ahead of the 2015 Federal Election.</p> <p>-The Leap looks to address the overlapping crisis of climate change, racism and economic inequality through community led, grassroots organizing across Canada.</p>
Devlin Fernandes- Ecotrust	<p>-Devlin Fernandes is the Director of Community Programs at Ecotrust</p> <p>- Ecotrust Canada is an enterprise non-profit, that seeks to develop alternative economic systems at the community level that recognize the value of natural systems, while supporting communities.</p> <p>-Ecotrust works on the ground, particularly in rural and Indigenous communities to develop examples of how economic systems can support communities, while valuing ecosystem services.</p>
Bob Thomson- Degrowth Canada	<p>Bob Thomson has been involved in degrowth conferences since the First International Degrowth Conference in Paris in 2008. He was a lead organizer of the 2012 Degrowth Conference in Montreal.</p> <p>-Bob set up a federal non-profit corporation degrowth Canada, décroissance Canada, and runs the website degrowth.ca.</p>
Michelle Molnar- David Suzuki Foundation	<p>At the David Suzuki Foundation Michelle Molnar works as an environmental economist, and policy analyst. This work includes looking at issues such as natural capital and ecosystem service valuation, as well as growth, degrowth, and steady state economies</p> <p>-Michelle has taught ecological economists at the British Columbia Institute of Technology.</p> <p>-She is on the board for the Canadian Society of Ecological Economics.</p>
Mike Wilson- Smart Prosperity Institute	<p>-The Smart Prosperity Institute is a research and policy-oriented think tank that focuses on market-based solutions for a green economy.</p> <p>- Mike Wilson has a background in environmental law, and is the Executive Director of the Smart Prosperity Institute.</p>

<p>Bill Rees- One Earth</p>	<p>--Bill Rees is a founding director of the One Earth initiative; a research think tank addressing systems of consumption and production of economies across scales.- He is a retired full professor of ecological economics and community and regional planning at University of British Columbia. -He has had a decades long research interest in the human relationship to the larger biophysical environment, and particularly towards understanding why we don't seem to respond to our best available science. -He is the originator and co-developer of ecological footprint analysis.</p>
<p>Ben Isitt- Victoria city councillor</p>	<p>Ben Isitt is a community organizer, an activist and elected representative. -He works generally on eco-socialist issues such as social justice campaigns around housing and anti-racism, peace, environmental campaigns around forest policy, oil and gas, pipelines. -He is in his third term as city councillor for the City of Victoria</p>
<p>Mark Bigland-Pritchard- Climate Justice Saskatoon</p>	<p>Mark Bigland-Pritchard has a chemical engineering background and has been working for several years on what it would do to shift the electricity grid in Saskatchewan to 100% renewables. -He is an organizer with Climate Justice Saskatoon a grassroots organization that pushes for community led justice-based solutions to climate breakdown. -He ran as a Green Party candidate in the 2015 Federal Election and holds the personal view that we need to abandon growth as a primary political goal, and move to measures of real human welfare.</p>
<p>Rachel Malena-Chan Climate Justice Saskatoon</p>	<p>Rachel Malena-Chan is an organizer with Climate Justice Saskatoon a grassroots organization that pushes for community led justice-based solutions to climate breakdown.</p>
<p>Chelsea Fougere- Solidarity Halifax</p>	<p>-Solidarity Halifax is at its very core a non-sectarian, pluralist anti-capitalist organization. -It is a grassroots organization that looks to create spaces to debate, activate and develop alternatives to capitalism. -Chelsea Fougere is the convener of the ecojustice committee.</p>

Guy Dauncey- Author and organizer	Guy Dauncey is a long-time climate activist and author, who works to develop a positive vision of a sustainable future, and to translate that vision into action.
Richard Swift- Journalist, author and activist	Richard Swift is a journalist and activist, who has worked on environmental and social justice issues. -He produced the CBC Radio Ideas Program "The Degrowth Paradigm" in December 2013. -He is the author of SOS: Alternatives to Capitalism (2014).
Harjap Grewal- Council of Canadians and community organizer	Harjap Grewal is a long-time activist and community organizer who has been involved in environmental activism, including work around the early days of the tar sands, and with impacted Indigenous communities. -He has been involved in migrant justice work, and anti-capitalist organizing on issues from housing in the downtown East side of Vancouver to the antiwar movement.

Role of the researcher.

Positivism in its starkest form assumes that research, to be objective, must abstract the researcher from the subject/object of research; that there is no space "... for human participation in the production of knowledge beyond merely receiving information in a *tabula rasa*- like fashion" (Code, 1995, p.13). According to positivists, in order to conduct research, we must put our values aside. Feminist scholars have been critical in questioning the nature and foundations of knowledge, what constitutes knowledge and how it is obtained (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). They have brought to our attention that research is socially situated, and by its very nature, is politically engaged. As Campbell and Wasco write,

What we consider to be knowledge is not 'pure fact' because it is filtered through these various lenses...The identity of the knower is of critical importance because values, beliefs, and life experiences influence how research questions are formed, data are collected, and findings are interpreted (2000, p.780).

From these critical interventions we know that who we are, the experiences that have shaped us, and our values, all have a bearing on the research questions we ask, and how we go about answering them. The research questions that underpin this thesis are not neutral—they are

political, and value-laden. The starting point of this research is the assumption that the current system of globalized capital accumulation and the values and ‘truths’ that underpin that system are deeply flawed, and are leading us down a path that threatens all life on Earth (Satgar, 2018; Klein, 2014, Magdoff & Williams, 2017). I have chosen to do research that contributes to an understanding of how this system operates, and why it remains hegemonic. My objective is to contribute to the understanding of how we can move beyond that system, to one that is life sustaining. I have come to this topic out of my strong and longstanding commitment to climate justice.

I also recognize that the questions I ask, the assumptions I choose to unpack, and those that I do not, are connected to my lived experiences and the ways I walk through the world. The work of Donna Haraway (1988) on situated knowledges reminds us that knowledge is situated within the socio-cultural and material ways we move through the world, and thus come to know it. My ability to conduct this research is interwoven into the same power relations that I write about and is a result of my privilege as white woman of settler ancestry, who has had the good luck to be born into a middle-class family. My time in the School of Environmental Studies has been a critical period of self-reflection about my positionality, about the types of knowledges, biases and assumptions I hold and have been taught. A significant gap in academic degrowth discourse is its failure to fully reckon with colonial history (this is particularly the case for research produced in and about North America). While the degrowth movement has its contemporary roots in western Europe, one can see the antecedents to degrowth outside Western epistemological traditions, in Indigenous thought and in other non-Western ways of viewing the world (Kothari, 2017; LaDuke, 2017). In Chapter 4, I discuss the importance of taking a decolonial approach to degrowth, however this remains a significant gap in the field.

Thesis outline

My thesis is organized into four chapters. This first chapter has introduced the project, including the research questions that guide the thesis, the critical context and background, as well as the methodologies and methods that have guided the research process. The second chapter explores the current barriers to degrowth in the Canadian context that were shared with me, and focuses its analysis on the political economy of Canada, and its reliance on the fossil fuel industry as producing particular challenges in shaping the political terrain in Canada, as well as impacting the power and orientation of environmental organizing. The third chapter discusses the pathways to degrowth that were shared with me from my interviews. It focuses on seven important components of a degrowth project in Canada, which include: degrowth as a counter hegemonic movement, degrowth as a decolonial project, avoiding the politics of purity, raising class consciousness and economic literacy, employing multiple frames as entry points into degrowth debates, and adopting an action research agenda. Finally, the concluding chapter will summarize the key themes and take-aways of this research.

Chapter 2- The barriers to degrowth in Canada

Introduction

In the first chapter, I introduced the degrowth literature and some of its omissions. In particular, I shed light on one of the most significant gaps in the literature - the question of *how* to operationalize degrowth ideas and policies. As Hubert Buch-Hansen (2018) notes in a recent article, to date the degrowth literature has not been attentive to critical questions of political acceptability. He writes:

The degrowth movement has thus far had negligible impact on the functioning of the wider economic system. In existing scholarship on degrowth there is surprisingly little discussion either on why degrowth remains politically marginalized or of what it would take for a desired paradigm shift to materialize (2018, p.157).

This chapter seeks to address this gap in the Canadian context. To do so this chapter draws on interviews with fourteen environmental actors and activists working throughout the environmental sector. All of the interviews were conducted between January and March 2018, and took place either in person or via skype. Interviewees were located across Canada, and the interview method was semi-structured, allowing respondents the opportunity to reflect, raise issues, and pursue their own lines of thought. There was a general consensus among interview participants that the degrowth movement has had a marginal influence not only on policy and institutions in Canada, but on environmental organizing as well. According to the interviewees, both provincial governments and the federal government fail to face current climate realities. Many respondents spoke of the difficulties they experience in trying to advance a degrowth perspective, with some participants or their organizations even deciding not to embrace degrowth because it was not considered a politically acceptable position to take. They expressed a concern that the discourse of degrowth would not resonate with key stakeholders, and that this might impede meaningful action on the ground.

My interviewees shared many responses, (quoted below in italics) when asked about the biggest barriers to forwarding a degrowth agenda in the Canadian context. Eight core barriers emerged from their responses and these are summarized in Figure 1. They include: Capitalism, neoliberalism, the consolidation of corporate power, the power of the fossil fuel industry specifically, increased social inequality and insecurity, and the sheer complexity of the issues. While all of these themes are related, the interviewees raised specific concerns and different perspectives, which I believe warrant deeper analysis of how these forces animate the political landscape in Canada. On the basis of these themes, I explore in more detail some of the existing political ecology and critical political economy research that speak to the barriers raised by my interviewees. As such, this chapter is more than a narrative summary of quotes from key informants; it also provides more analytical context to the specific barriers that the activists themselves identified. In the next chapter, based upon the themes and analysis presented here, I will explore some of the possible pathways towards degrowth.

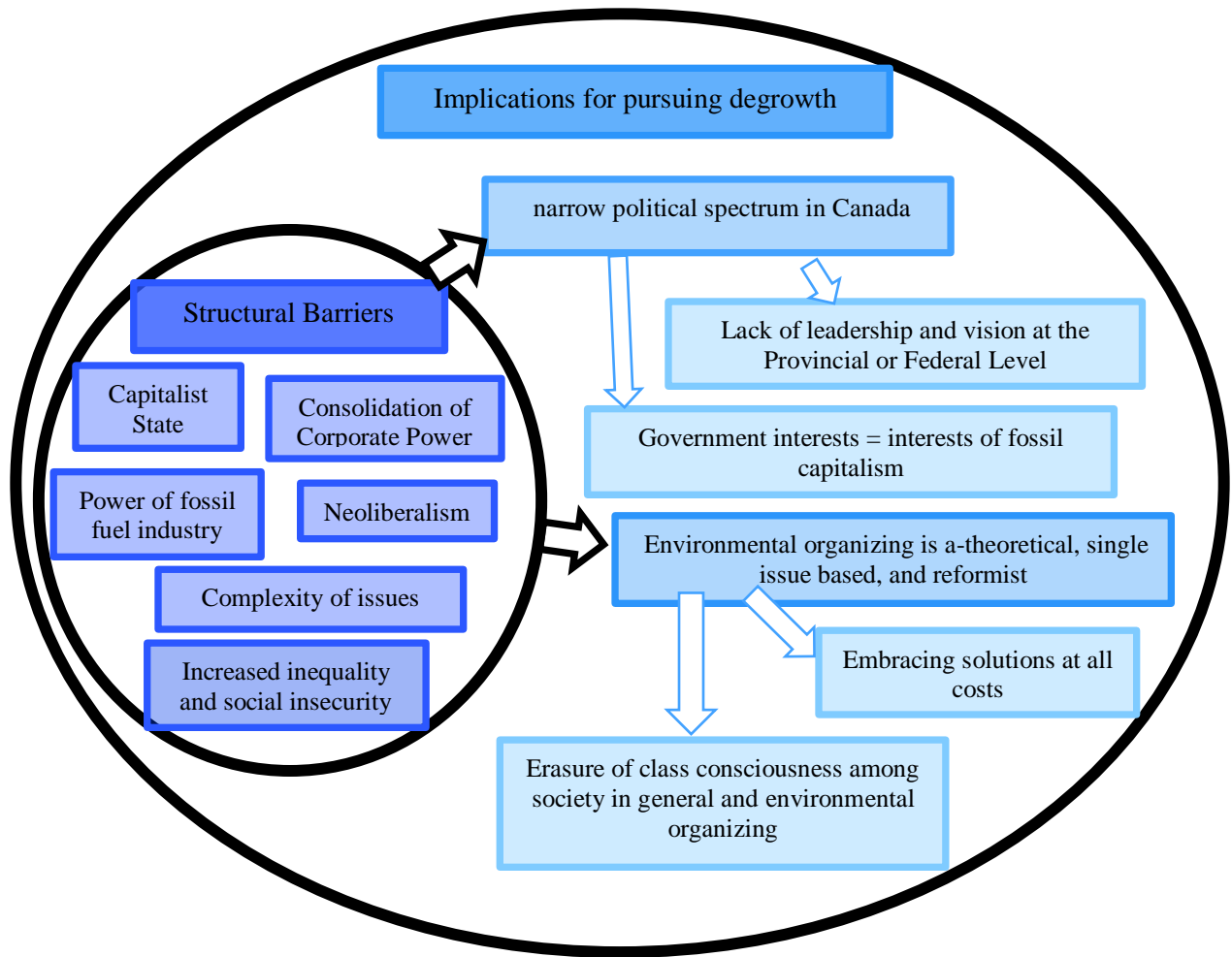


Figure 1- Barriers to pursuing degrowth in Canada

Capitalism.

Throughout my interviews, many respondents mobilized a critique of capitalism as a systemic barrier to a politics of degrowth. Ben Isitt shared:

Well capitalism- the dominance of markets, economically but also how that translates into the political system, political culture, broader culture, because capitalism is the philosophy of growth, the philosophy of the parasite. Degrowth is antithetic to capitalism, and historically capitalism has been dominant in Canada. We have never had an anti-capitalist party, or a party that is even critical of capitalism form power at the federal level. And at the provinces whether the NDP or Parti Quebecois who have historically been aligned with the socialist movement, they have at times curbed the role of markets in some of their policies, but generally, most of the leaders of social democratic provincial governments have been fairly supportive of a growth perspective. And the current NDP governments of BC and Alberta are an example of that.

Isitt raises important questions about the possibilities for degrowth and its political acceptability in the Canadian context, compared to other states that have different political histories. The political imagination in Canada may be constrained by the belief that there is no real alternative to capitalism relative to states that have experienced other forms of social organizing. Moreover, there are potentially less robust anti-capitalist movement structures and institutions in Canada than in other places where anti-capitalist parties and movements have operated throughout history. This could mean that capitalist institutions have remained largely unchallenged in popular and mainstream discourse in Canada relative to elsewhere. As Mark Bigland-Pritchard of Climate Justice Saskatoon shared with me, this is true of understandings of economic growth in Canada:

The growth mantra has just been rammed at us again and again and again in every possible conceivable context, you know even when Justin is trying to at least look like he is aiming to hit ghg emissions target, the Liberals present their whole package (the Pan Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change) in terms of GHG emissions reductions and growth.

Neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism as a specific barrier was the most commonly raised, mentioned by five interviewees. While all had slightly different critiques of neoliberalism, the two quotes highlighted below reflect both the importance and the differing understanding of what neoliberalism means for the activists I interviewed:

Guy Dauncey: I think you feel a general sort of blur and discovering among other things that the whole neoliberal agenda is actually simply a smoke screen for wealthier people to get wealthier.

Bill Rees: There is a socially-constructed myth at the heart of the system currently driving the planet. Belief in perpetual growth and technological advances is fundamental to neoliberal market capitalism, which is the primary driver of so-called development on Earth today. This means, we have a double problem with humanity in that our species has a natural tendency to expand and we cling to a socially-constructed myth that

reinforces that innate expansionist tendency. People call this process 'development', but this is really not development (getting better) it is simply growth (getting bigger).

To further define neoliberalism and clarify how it has manifested in Canada I turn below to critical political economy scholars whose work supports the positions shared by my interviewees.

There is now an extensive literature and field of study that addresses neoliberalism. Scholars have explored in depth neoliberalism as a political project, outlining what distinguishes neoliberalism from other forms of capitalist organization (i.e. Braedley & Luxton, 2010; Harvey, 2007; Springer Birch, & MacLeavy, 2016). At its most rudimentary, neoliberalism is often defined as an economic ideology that presents the free market as the most efficient and favourable way to mediate and regulate human interactions (Zanoni, Contu, Healy & Mir, 2017; Altamirano-Jiménez, 2013; Brown, 2015). Neoliberalism is commonly understood as an historically specific politico-economic project reacting to 20th century socialism and Keynesianism. As an ideology it directly opposes collectivism and economic redistribution that these two systems advocate for (Braedley & Luxton, 2010). Guided by the belief that individual freedom is maximized through competition, neoliberal policy advocates for the extension of capitalist ideology and its ethics into political, social and cultural institutions.

Peck and Tickell (2002) distinguish the policies to neoliberalize the state as involving both 'roll back' and 'roll out' neoliberalism. 'Roll back' neoliberalism involves the reduction of public support, policy, and funding to many areas of the public sector, such as welfare and redistributive policies, childcare, health, and education, eldercare, and the deregulation and privatization of vast sectors of the economy including: utilities, public transport, roads, parks, etc. (Harvey, 2007; Brown, 2015). This is justified on the basis that these sectors or services are the responsibility of the individual, who should have the freedom to choose from privately run

services that can more efficiently offer them the ‘costly’ public services (Connell, 2010). In practice, this process has seen to the rolling back of people’s basic rights to food, shelter, health, and education, and the erosion of the rights of workers and the environment (Harvey, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2002). ‘Roll out’ neoliberalism occurs through the deployment of economic, legal, and political regulation that favours industry, the ‘free’ market, the mobility of capital, and intensified commodification and private property rights (Peck & Tickell, 2002; Peck, Theodore & Brenner, 2012; Walks & Clifford, 2015). In practice this has manifest through the creation of free trade deals, as well as of new governing international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to oversee the global adherence to the neoliberal project (Aguirre, Eick, & Reese, 2006). Government policy and planning then is enacted to ensure and protect competitiveness of individuals and corporations in the market (Braedley & Luxton, 2010).

The primary role of the state under neoliberalism is to maintain the institutional apparatus that allows for the proper functioning of the market economy, to ensure that the conditions for ongoing accumulation are protected (Harvey, 2007). The state then gains its legitimacy from neoliberal subjects and the corporate elite through its ability to create and maintain the conditions for ongoing economic growth and the accumulation of capital in private hands (Harvey, 2007). Said differently, this means that business and corporate interests become state interests and the priority of state policy (Luxton, 2010). This has the primary effect of reducing the priority of the state to be singularly focused on increased growth, measured as GDP. This has served to privilege specific actors- i.e. finance capital over manufacturing, market rule over state rule, the global over local, and consumers over citizens.

In Canada, the embrace of neoliberalism began in the 1980s with the federal election of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in 1984 (Moszynski, 2003). Mulroney’s election changed the

political landscape in Canada, as his Progressive Conservative government began to quietly and rapidly dismantle the Keynesian welfare programs that had been built up over the previous 40 years (Moszynski, 2003). This occurred through scaling back on social welfare expenditures, advocating in its place increased privatization and the supremacy of market rule over government rule. The Mulroney government initiated a wave of cuts to family allowance programs, unemployment insurance, and to provincial government transfers to support: welfare programs and benefits, healthcare and education, and other social programs (Moszynski, 2003; Carroll & Shaw, 2001; Cossman & Fudge, 2002; Clark, 2002). The Mulroney government also emphasized ‘managerial reform initiatives’ to shift the culture of the public service to one managed more closely as a private enterprise, emphasizing ‘efficiencies’ and ‘cost benefit analyses’ in order to reduce the cost and size of the public service (Clark, 2002). Privatization of public goods such as electricity and contracting out government services to the private sector intensified as well. Many high-profile crown corporations were privatized, including Air Canada, Petro Canada, Teleglobe, and the Canada Development Corporation (Banting & Hoberg, 1997).

The Mulroney government was also responsible for negotiating the US-Canada Free Trade Agreement, signed in 1988, and subsequently starting the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect under the Liberal government in 1994 (McCarthy, 2004). This agreement played a critical role in solidifying neoliberalism as a hegemonic order across North America, weaving it “into the fabric of life in Canada” (Carroll, 2003, p.43). The signing of NAFTA represented the embrace of neoliberal policies and legal frameworks across North America as it sought to open up markets and limit the state’s role in regulating industry and trade activity (McCarthy, 2004). NAFTA opened up Canada further to Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and placed the state in greater competition

with the USA and Mexico, as each state could now pursue industries that aligned with their ‘comparative advantage.’ For Canada this meant the promotion of primary resource sectors over manufacturing (Watkins, 2001).

The signing of NAFTA gave almost equal protections to capitalist firms as it did to governments, limiting the role of the state to regulate economic activity, which subsequent governments remain legally beholden to uphold (McCarthy, 2004; Clement & Williams, 1998). For example, the investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) allowed corporations to sue a government for policy and legal changes that could hurt the profitability of a corporation (Barlow, 2015). This consequences of this shift in the role of government brought on through neoliberal policies and ideologies was something Harjap Grewal raised. He shared:

What neoliberalism really did for government was that it said very clearly that policy that inhibits corporate activity should not be an option right? It should just be adjustments of the market that governments should be looking at and you know to a large extent most governments have bought into that.

In Canada, there have many examples of provincial governments attempting to put in place environmental protections that have been challenged in very costly legal cases through ISDS, with governments spending \$95 million to defend themselves to date (Sinclair, 2018). In one such case, the Canadian government was ordered by the NAFTA tribunal to pay \$17.3 million to Exxon-Mobil, the world’s largest oil and gas company. This was over government requirements in Newfoundland and Labrador that companies engaged in offshore exploration must invest in local research and development (Barlow, 2015).

The Liberal government that came into power in 1993 led by Prime Minister Jean Chretien, continued the neoliberalization of the state, making further cuts to welfare policies and the social sector, and reducing health and social service spending by \$7 billion in just two years (Ready, 2012). The cuts were so drastic that by 2001 only 39% of unemployed Canadians were

eligible to collect unemployment benefits, down from 74% of unemployed Canadians who collected benefits in 1987 (Cameron, 2004). When the Conservative Party took power under Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2006, neoliberalism was the accepted and normalized way of governing; it was hegemonic. Harper continued this trajectory by focusing government efforts on expanding the private sector, and was highly concerned with pursuing ‘economic freedom.’ The metrics of economic freedom, measured by the Canadian right wing think tank the Fraser Institute include: “personal choice, voluntary exchange coordinated by markets, freedom to enter and compete in markets, and protection of persons and their property from aggression by others” (Gutstein, 2014, p.19; Healy, 2008). Put differently, economic freedom was, and continues to be, understood as the degree to which individuals or corporations can pursue their economic activity without government interference. In policy terms, this has meant a political landscape of “deregulation, low taxes, weak unions, the primacy of property over human rights, and trade over jobs” (Gutstein, 2014, p.44). In sum, over Harper’s time in office, the government carried out drastic cuts to public services, the deregulation of industry and environmental protections, a weakening of unions and the power of labour, and regressive immigration policies, all in the name of ‘efficiency’ and ‘economic freedom’ (Healy & Trew, 2015; Gutstein, 2014).

Another consequence of the embrace of neoliberalism that Harjap Grewal shared was that it:

has led to this slight amnesia in society among a lot of people. This includes unfortunately arenas like labour unions and social democratic parties that have bought into the idea that the market rules will ultimately determine how things happen. So, cap and trade is an obvious example, but even labour unions and others are supporting it.

Integrating my interview data and critical political economy research on neoliberalism, there appear to be three common understandings of how neoliberalism serves as a barrier to degrowth. One is the cultural hegemony that neoliberalism establishes - how it perpetuates a specific worldview with a set of values, norms and vocabularies that shape and inform what we

individually and culturally believe to be valuable. In so doing, this entrenches particular discourses “of claims making, forms of political engagement and zones of conflict” (Brodie, 2008, p.148). This cultural hegemony impacts how societies understand the role of the state, the economy, and themselves, thereby deeply constraining the possibilities for transformations that deviate from neoliberal norms. The second important way that neoliberalism serves as a barrier to degrowth are the structures that neoliberalism has established and reinforced, mainly the supremacy of the free market- and the legal structures to reinforce this, as the most effective tool for social, political and economic organization. The third thread is the massive concentrations of capital in the hands of the elite, that have come out of the neoliberal project. It is to this that we turn now.

Inequality.

A number of my interviewees raised growing inequality as a barrier to achieving degrowth. As Bigland-Pritchard shared with me:

The real problem in society is inequality, it's that people have more than they need. So, let's have some redistribution. But, of course the people who fund the parties tend to be the richer people, and the people who vote tend not to be the poor, so it is a difficult one for politicians to take on.

This was echoed by Michelle Molnar of the David Suzuki Foundation, who stated:

The proceeds from the economy are not going to the middle class, they are obviously not going to the lower classes, they are really going to this really small elite. Talking about redistributing growth is a key way to introduce people to the idea that their level of income is not increasing at the rate that we see the economy growing.

Indeed, global inequality has been on the rise. In 2017, the wealth of the world's billionaires increased by 20%, adding an additional \$1.4 trillion USD to their coffers (Neate, 2018). As geographer David Harvey recently observed the “increasingly consolidated plutocratic capitalist class remains unchallenged in its ability to dominate the world without constraint” (Harvey,

2014, p.15). In Canada, a consequence of embracing neoliberalism is that income inequality has grown to levels not seen since the 1920s (Green & Milligan, 2007; Osberg, 2018). Today, the two wealthiest Canadians have the same combined wealth as the poorest 30% of Canadians (CBC, 2017). Economist Lars Osberg's research (2018) has documented the rising inequality in Canada. The research finds that while wages for the majority of Canadians have remained stagnant and for the poorest have depreciated- most of the growth in GDP growth has gone into the pockets of the top 1% of Canadians. Osberg (2018) further highlights that over the past 20 years, the richest income earners in Canada (the top quintile) have been the only group to see their share of national income increase, while all other quintiles have seen their share diminish. This paired with the deep cuts that were made throughout the 1990s to social services, means that the poorest citizens in Canada are "now substantially worse off than they were twenty-five years ago" (Osberg, 2018, p. 111). This gives a small handful of elites not only in Canada, but globally, unprecedented power over political and economic institutions, that permeates down into everyday life. How does this impact the possibilities and potentials for Degrowth? Today, it is the ideas and narratives produced by this elite capitalist class that have a major sway on what is assumed possible or impossible; what are collectively understood to be pressing issues, as well as their solutions (Aschoff, 2015; Wanner, 2015). As Nicole Aschoff observes about global elites, "They promote market-based solutions to the problems of corporate power, technology, gender divides, environmental degradation, alienation and inequality. Their visions carry within them a systemic and coherent meaning that seems possible, safe, and achievable within capitalism" (p.8). There are thus very powerful figures directing the global economy, and its adherence to the growth ideology. For the capitalist class a move to degrowth would threaten their ability to generate profit, undermining their existence. So, while the majority of people

could benefit from the sorts of proposals that degrowth offers, those who hold positions of power do not.

Consolidation of Corporate Power.

Highly connected to inequality, the power of corporations to exert influence over political and economic systems and institutions emerged as a barrier by some of my interviewees.

Michelle Molnar stated: *Corporations who have a lot of political power, I think are driving this continued adherence to growth.* Bill Rees added:

So, the corporate sector has essentially purchased the political system, and of course when it puts money into the system they expect to get something out of it in the form of policies favourable to them. The Trump Government's dismantling of so much of the Environmental Regulatory Framework in the US is a good example.

Neoliberalism's advance has helped to consolidate power among Canada's corporate elite, who possess the ability to exert great power within and beyond Canada's political economy (Carroll, 2016a). Contemporary Canadian capitalism is effectively driven by large firms that accrue massive profits and revenue. Furthermore, neoliberal policies that have limited redistribution help the already wealthy accrue even more wealth and power (Drache, 2014). In analyzing the concentrations of corporate power in the Canadian economy, Jordan Brennan (2015) found:

In the early 1950s the largest 60 firms represented approximately half the equity market value of the entire Toronto Stock Exchange (TsX). By the late 1970s their relative value had fallen to just 14% of the TsX. By 1988...Canada's top 60 firms accounted for 21% of TsX value before soaring to a postwar high of 65% in 2008. This means, remarkably, that the remaining 4,000 firms on the TsX accounted for about a third (35%) of total equity market value (p. 8).

Both the federal and provincial governments are beholden to those firms to a significant degree; as economist Lars Osberg (2018) states:

With great wealth comes the economic power to withhold or to grant investment and needed jobs, and the political influence that accompanies that economic power. And there

is a cost in this for the 99 percent. The increasingly separate world of the top 1 percent means their perceptions and their preferences are increasingly disconnected from those of ordinary people. At the same time, their growing influence over the political process diminishes the relative influence of the rest of society, to a degree that will increase over time as top-end inequality continues to increase (p.88).

The Canadian context is reflective of Global trends. Currently we have a global political climate that favours corporate interests, with its drive towards economic growth as core goal. The global economy is now managed and maintained in part through international bodies such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Together they have unleashed a global infrastructure to disseminate and maintain a global neoliberal order (Chorev & Babb, 2009; Harvey, 2007; Kumi, Arhin & Yeboah, 2014). As Hickel (2016) notes, these powerful governing bodies have no democratic elements, and they work to erode the power of voters to “decide the rules that govern the economic systems they inhabit” but also discipline and erode the power of those states that attempt to intervene and exercise agency over national economies (p.142). This helps to explain the results of Gilens and Page’s study on political influence in the U.S from 1991 to 2002 that found that it was the economic elites and interest of business that had substantive impact on government policy, while “average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence” (2014, p.564).

Oil and Gas sector.

Through my interviews, some respondents zeroed in specifically on the oil and gas sector as representing a set of interests and influences that remain a major barrier to realizing a degrowth politics in Canada. Much of the built environment in Canada has been constructed around “matrices of affordable and abundant petroleum”; and, in addition, the economy has become highly dependent on the extraction and export of fossil fuels (Haarstad & Wanvik, 2017,

p.432; MacArthur, 2014). The oil and natural gas industry make up at least a third of the GDP in the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland, and roughly ten percent of Canadian GDP (Carter, 2014; Hern & Johal, 2018) This creates a political landscape that supports the ongoing expansion of fossil fuels despite the (very real) implications this has for the climate (MacArthur, 2014). An analysis of the barriers to degrowth would be incomplete without addressing how this industry has impeded meaningful action to the climate crisis. This was expressed as critical by many of my interviewees, including Mark Bigland-Pritchard, who currently lives and works in Saskatchewan. He shared the following with me:

A big obstacle is that this province is largely run by the oil industry. The Sask party is loaded with money basically from fossil fuel companies and they are not necessarily taking so much money from them now, but they have got loads of it in their bank account, so they identify the interests of Saskatchewan basically with the interests of extractivist industries generally, and the oil industry in particular.

Canada contains the third largest proven oil reserve in the world, located below vast tracts of Boreal Forest. Beneath the territories of the Dene, Cree and Métis people, in what is today Northern Alberta, there are 174 billion barrels of bitumen oil. The extraction of this oil is the world's largest energy project and site of capital investment in Canada (Adkin, 2016; Hern & Johal, 2018; Nikiforuk, 2010). The process of extracting and refining the oil found in Alberta is particularly damaging for people and the planet. This is because the oil there exists in the form of bitumen- a heavy tar like substance, that must be heavily refined to separate the oil from the sand or clay (Black, D'Arcy & Weis, 2014). This process is highly carbon intensive, producing three times as much greenhouse gases per barrel as conventional oil types (Nikiforuk, 2010).

The massive development of this project through the Boreal Forest has had particularly harmful impacts on the First Nations communities where the tar sands have been developed

without their consent (Lameman, 2014; Laboucan-Massimo, 2014). Speaking of the impacts on Lubicon Territory, Melina Laboucan-Massimo (2014) states:

Over fourteen hundred square kilometres of leases have been granted for tar sands and fracking development in Lubicon territory, and almost 70 percent of the remaining land has been leased for future development. Where there once was self-sufficiency, we are seeing increased dependency on social services, as families are no longer able to sustain themselves in what was once a healthy environment with clean air, clean water, medicines, berries, and plants from the boreal forest. Our way of life is being replaced by industrial landscapes, polluted and drained watersheds, and contaminated air. And it's very much a crisis situation (pp.116-117).

Foreign investments and capital have played a critical role in the development of the tar sands, with about half of the industry's capital and production being foreign owned (Carter, 2014). This not only requires a strong government presence to negotiate the sorts of trade and policy agreements to market the tar sands as a safe place for investment, but its development has been further aided through longstanding government investments and subsidies.³ From late 2017 to mid 2018, the government of Alberta distributed \$510 million to help with emissions reductions, and \$1 billion towards facilities upgrades alone (Wilt, 2018). Furthermore, financial institutions in Canada are deeply embedded in this industry. As Jackson writes: "one third of all Toronto Stock-Exchange listed companies are resource related, and another third are financial with heavy exposure to the resource sector" (2018). This has developed a vast infrastructure across the country to get the oil to market, making it truly a national project in scope, with socio-economic implications for all of Canada.

³ More recently, and evidence of the power of the divestment movement, we have seen large corporations divesting from the tar sands including HSBC, BNP Paribas, Dutch bank ING and Sweden's largest pension fund (McSheffrey, 2018).

While located in Alberta, the development of this project and industry extends across Canada and beyond. Angela Carter documents how the impact of this development expands across Canada: drawing labour from all parts of the country, through vast pipelines, and proposed pipeline infrastructure to bring bitumen to tide water, and through the pollution, including CO2 emissions that have a global impact (2014). She writes: “the industry is contingent on volatile global price fluctuations in response to the vagaries of international reserves and far off geopolitics. In short, what happens in Alberta doesn’t stay in Alberta - and the fate of Alberta is entangled in a far broader global context” (2014, p.23-24).

The embrace of neoliberalism in Canada at both the federal and provincial levels has had important implications for the development of fossil fuel infrastructure in Canada and in producing a political landscape that is highly antithetical to degrowth (Shrivastava & Stefanick, 2015). The opening up of markets and Canadian industry to FDI, and the loosening of regulations on industry, coincided with the major expansion of the tar sands in the 1990s. For example, exports from the industry grew from \$28 billion in 1999 to \$128 billion in 2008 (Carter, 2014). On this Jen Preston (2017) states that:

The mid-1990s ushered in the period of high-volume rapid extraction that continues into the present, as increasing numbers of oil and gas competitors invested in the tar sands under conditions of virtually unregulated, unhindered, non-taxable resource plundering. While governance systems shifted to account for the burgeoning investment and economic activity in the sector and region, so did the neoliberal discourses, which narrated what has become the largest industrial project on earth (p.366).

The role of the government shifted from being key players in the development of the tar sands to “facilitators of industry development” (Steward, 2017, p.2). Part of the shift in roles included a heavy focus on ensuring that Canada, and the oil and gas industry were internationally recognized as a safe place for private and foreign investment (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada 2015). This priority to remain a safe place for investment has most

recently been used by the federal government to justify the purchase of the Trans Mountain pipeline, despite the overwhelming evidence that it would contribute to climate change (Holroyd & Coates, 2018). This is one dominant logic in Canada that currently blocks meaningful action on climate change. What is more, since the 1990s we have also seen the rise of the oil and gas industry playing a more directive role in policymaking. In Alberta, this initially took the form of the government adopting a royalty system produced by the industry, streamlining the project approval process, and handing over the regulation process to the oil corporations, so that they were responsible for regulating themselves (Steward, 2017).

Stephen Harper's Conservative government was particularly committed to supporting the fossil fuel industry. He spent nine years in power working to transform Canada into "an energy superpower" with major consequences for the political and regulatory environment in Canada (Taber, 2006; Smith, 2015). The systematic deregulation and reregulation in favour of the fossil fuel industry was justified by a neoliberal rationale with the mantra that "more extraction means more wealth and more jobs" (Weis, Black, D'Arcy, & Russell, 2014, p.7). The government enabled this through development policies and programs designed to support and subsidize the growth of the energy sector over and above concerns for Indigenous rights, ecological integrity, health, workers' rights, and the climate (Shrivastava & Stefanick, 2015; Adkin, 2016).

During his time, Harper grew increasingly hostile towards climate and environmental activists, going so far as to label them eco-terrorists (Adkin, 2016). His government gutted environmental laws such as the Fisheries Act, and environmental monitoring systems, and slashed funding to climate programs by 40%. The government failed to put in place any sound climate policy before eventually becoming the first to pull out of the Kyoto accord (Adkin, 2016; Shrivastava & Stefanick, 2015; Healy, 2008). The federal government also changed regulations

in order to speed up the process for pipeline approval by severely limiting civic participation of opponents in the hearing processes (Gunton, 2014, p.48). The government's view was that if business believes environmental regulations were too burdensome, "then they must go" (Kinney, 2015, p.345). Where climate policy was put in place, it took the form of market-based governance and industry voluntarism to reduce relative emissions of industrial activity (MacArthur, 2014). Not only did fossil fuel emissions intensify, but so too did the power of this industry on the Canadian political landscape. As Jody Chan from the Leap told me about the fossil fuel industry in Canada:

... the regulator and the whole government has been totally captured by the industry at all levels, like their industry representatives everywhere, they are all involved in decision making, they're close personal friends with government officials, so it is really like the level of influence that really powerful industry, and especially the fossil fuel industry in Canada has really is embedded in all levels of government and so, when that is the case, of course it is hard to get some of the change that needs to happen.

The interests of this powerful industry are not only connected with the government, but are also now embedded in common sense or hegemonic understandings of life of many Canadians. This dependence on the flows of fossil fuels to secure many livelihoods produces a social life with particular ways of thinking and engaging in politics (Huber, 2013). Haluza-Delay (2012) has shown how the fossil fuel industry in Alberta has been successful at manufacturing mainstream consent for the industry despite its devastating impacts on ecological systems. This is exemplified in the advertising campaigns by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) that use tag lines such as "Alberta is energy," and "Energy is more than a commodity; it is our way of life" (in Dorrow, 2015, p.275). This works to position the oil industry as inseparable from the identity of Alberta (Haluza-Delay, 2012). As Haluza-Delay writes, this means that "any contestation to the dominance of oil production has been decried as contrary to

the interests of the Alberta people themselves” (Haluza-Delay, 2012, p.4). Speaking on the context in Saskatchewan, Rachel Malena-Chan told me:

Industry is totally woven into social and cultural life as well as political and economic life, so you are kind of painted as an enemy of the people if you oppose or critique these industries

The extent to which the oil and gas industry is embedded in government is such that former leader of the Alberta Liberal Party, and author of *Oil's Deep State: How the petroleum industry undermines democracy and stops action on global warming - in Alberta, and in Ottawa*, Kevin Taft said, “In Canada, the fossil fuel industry has captured really key democratic institutions and in some ways has captured so many of them that it has formed what I call a deep state...So democracy stops functioning for the people and begins to function first and foremost for the fossil fuel industry” (Livesey, 2018). What many interviewees shared with me, and as other research has also found, is that to speak against the tar sands and the building of pipelines borders on heretical, despite the fact that the main beneficiaries remain the multinational oil companies and their shareholders, while the environmental costs are paid both directly and indirectly by governments and local communities, and the planet as a whole (Taliano, 2014). This means that currently even the most basic environmental policies such as a carbon tax remain contentious, as political parties have won provincial elections in part on platforms to reject the implementation of a federal carbon tax (CBC, 2019).

Complexity.

Another barrier some interviewees spoke to was the sheer complexity of both the issues we face, as well as their solutions. As Devlin Fernandes of Ecotrust Canada shared: *both the complexity of the challenge and the complexity of the solution can be really hard. And, when people are wanting very short sound bites or easy solutions, you know it is difficult if the*

problem is big and complicated and messy and the solution might be big and complicated and messy. An important issue she raised connected with this challenge of complexity, is that the types of solutions required are far reaching, and long term, and do not necessarily fit into the one to four-year time frames that governments and decision makers operate within.

Speaking more specifically to the challenges of communicating on degrowth, and the call to move beyond GDP, to a suite of wellbeing indicators, Mark Bigland-Pritchard shared:

I think, it is partly because of complexity, you know if you are looking at alternative measures for human wellbeing they are all combinations of lots of different things because they have to be, and that is complex, and talking about it is complex, you can't do it in a twitter tweet, and so that is part of it, so you lose people's attention.

This is an ongoing challenge not just faced by degrowth proponents, but in communicating about climate breakdown more generally. As Meehan Crist writes:

For journalists, scientists, activists, and those engaged in ‘climate communication’—a burgeoning field dedicated to understanding how information about climate change moves through cultural systems—the question of how to tell engaging stories remains open and urgent. Climate change is huge, abstract, and wickedly complex, so it resists the kind of easy narrative that might make it stick in a reader’s mind or suggest concrete policy (2019).

How do these systemic barriers- capitalism, neoliberalism, inequality, the consolidation of corporate power, the power of the fossil fuel industry and complexity affect the possibilities for advocating for degrowth in Canada? This next section will address how these barriers impact political institutions in Canada, and how they also shape and influence environmental organizing itself.

The limits of political institutions in Canada

Given the dominance of fossil capitalism in Canadian politics, outlined above, it comes as less of a surprise that a politics of degrowth remains marginal. A theme that surfaced in most

of the interviews was the ubiquity of a specific and very narrow understanding of the economy, and how deeply embedded it is in both formal governing structures, and in public opinion. As

Mike Wilson, of the Smart Prosperity Institute stated:

We definitely have public opinion research that has told us that people are not comfortable with the idea of degrowth, in general... they have economic ambitions. The most interesting polling that we've accessed is that people overwhelmingly want both a strong economy and a protected environment, and they also overwhelmingly believe that they can have that. But, what they believe makes it difficult is that they don't trust any of the societal actors that are acting on those issues, they think that both government and business are interested in profitability and economic growth at the expense of everything else. And, they think the non-profit community is too fixed on environmental progress but doesn't care about economic viability, so they don't trust that there is a group and a delivery agent essentially that can realize on that ambition that what they want is a strong economy, protected environment.

In speaking of her work with Ecotrust Canada, to promote a conservation-based economy, Devlin Fernandes shared:

We have actually struggled with getting people to understand what the conservation economy is, and so both the complexity of the challenge, the complexity of the solutions can be really hard, and when people are wanting very short sound bites or easy solutions, you know it is difficult if the problem is big and complicated and messy and the solution might be big and complicated and messy.

The narrow field of public opinion is no doubt shaped by our, relatively speaking, narrow political spectrum: all three major parties in Canada are pro-growth and neoliberal in orientation.

As many relayed to me, an existing barrier is that there is little space within formal political institutions for debate that seriously addresses the intersecting issues of climate and ecological breakdown, inequality, and economic growth to the degree necessitated by the scale of climate breakdown. For example, activist and journalist Richard Swift stated:

I think it [degrowth] is a difficult sell, particularly in North America because I think that the kind of opposition that has grown up, the kind of political spectrum that exists here between the right and the left is actually fairly narrow, it generates a lot of heat in terms of people's supposed differences with each other. But, when you boil it down it is often a belief in jobs, and a belief in growth to create jobs, and a belief in expanding the pie.

Some interviewees shared stories of trying to advance debates about the role of economic growth in the economy with progressive politicians and were told that while they understood their position and arguments, these debates were not perceived as politically viable in public discourse. Mark Bigland- Pritchard suggested that: *In terms of talking with politicians, even the sympathetic ones are saying we can't talk about growth and expressed it is very easy to be marginal here, actually breaking into the mainstream I just haven't figured it out.* This was echoed by Rachel Malena-Chan, who stated:

These are national realities in terms of the limited scope that we have for conversations around climate change and degrowth, but I think that Saskatchewan is particularly difficult because in the last handful of elections the Sask party has won with such popularity, and the previous leader who just retired Brad Wall, was very popular until very recently, and so there was this sense within NDP organizations, and I was a part of campaigns where this went down, that you just, you couldn't stray very far from what he was doing because he was popular, why would you do something different, so there were sort of internal struggles to open that space within the party and to say well what if we offered something more radical and pushed that sort of agenda.

Michelle Molnar argued that:

There is an absolute almost inability to even consider the question of economic growth, the closest you had was maybe a year and a half ago when Bernie Sanders might have hinted at it, but you never see a politician running on a platform of steady state, or even degrowth, you know it's this assumption that people don't even really dig into.

And this is not for lack of effort to bring degrowth debates to the political arena. As Bill Rees shared with me:

A colleague of mine and I wrote a manifesto for degrowth and limits to growth with examples from the UK and Europe, which we have distributed to select members of Parliament. We have tried to get a Parliamentary Discussion underway in Ottawa, but honestly, we were told point blank by members of the Liberal party that the party caucus is utterly committed to the growth ethic, and that there is no way that we could get a discussion going about degrowth within the government. Also, there seems to be no support for an all-party committee or task force on the steady state, or degrowth, in Canada, certainly not at present.

This does not come as a surprise given the neoliberal orientation of our current state. What was communicated to me by some of my respondents is that they experience that the only option for working with provincial and federal governments is to adopt a green growth strategy, that advocates for a ‘strong economy’ and leaves unquestioned the impacts of endless growth on a finite planet.

As a consequence, many of the people whom I interviewed at the grassroots level, and who have a politics more in line with those advocated by degrowth, do not feel that engaging with formal political institutions is worthwhile or viable. For example, Richard Swift stated that: *I think that one strategy is not try and win over the political class, to implement degrowth because I think that would be a waste of time.* Similar sentiments were expressed by Chelsea of Fougere of Solidarity Halifax: *we are not going to find the solutions that we need in our current systems.*

These critical perspectives do not mean rejecting the role or possibilities of the state outright. As activist writers Matt Hern and Am Johal state: “in reality questions of state versus non-state organizing are always intensely complex and contingent. It always depends: what state are we talking about, where in the world do we mean, what are the alternatives, what nonstate actors are we lionizing?” (2018, p.148). Hern and Johal call for a move beyond the state/nonstate binary, and instead call for both a critical and constructive politics that is dynamic and inquisitive and interrogates: “what should be defended and fought for, which coalitions should be hazarded, which projects should be built: such questions are always contingent and dependent” (Hern & Johal, 2018, p.149).

The limits of environmental organizing

Many interviewees also opened up about the limitations of current environmental organizing structures in Canada. The critique of mainstream environmentalism and its failure to account for questions of power and inequality is not new (Mohai, Pellow & Roberts, 2009; Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007). The history of environmentalism, particularly in the Global North, while diverse, has focused heavily on the protection of ecologically important sites, particularly for recreation (Stoddart, 2015). Mainstream western environmentalism has been animated by Eurocentric notions ‘untouched wilderness.’⁴ This, Stoddart (2015) notes, has implications such as:

Wilderness oriented environmentalism reinforces nature/society binaries that place a high social value on protected wilderness areas but do little to unsettle the everyday operation of industrial scale natural resource depletion, or routine air, water and soil pollution. As environmental movements have successfully raised the cultural values of wilderness places, they have often neglected questions about the mis-distribution of environmental goods such as exposure to environmental degradation and risk, or of environmental goods such as access to natural resources or to high quality water, air, or recreational environments (p.271).

A number of my interviewees echoed Stoddart’s critique, zeroing in on how mainstream environmentalism has failed to question larger systems and structures of power. Richard Swift, for example, expressed concern with the a-theoretical nature of environmental organizing in Canada. He said: *One of my frustrations I think with existing environmental politics was, it seemed extremely piecemeal or it seemed very single issue oriented.* Many grassroots organizers expressed their critiques of the environmental movement in Canada- as missing a rigorous political analysis. According to Guy Dauncey:

⁴ This Eurocentric understanding of wilderness that ENGOs mobilized around led to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their territories. Today relations between ENGOs and Indigenous Nations remain fraught, as Damian Lee (2011) argues: “ENGOs play a role in perpetuating colonialism in Canada, specifically by legitimizing the state’s control over Indigenous peoples” (p.133).

In the environmental and the social change movements many people have a very weak understanding of economics, and how the economy works. To many, the economy feels like a general confusing blur, and it takes a while to discover that the neoliberal agenda and its pro-market economics is actually a smokescreen, disguising policies that simply enable wealthy people to get wealthier. It is essential to understand economics through the lens of political economy, not as if it was an objective science.

More recently, we have seen many organizations embrace the same green growth discourse that has been mobilized by federal and provincial governments. As one interviewee expressed to me, it is not that they do not believe the arguments and perspectives of degrowth, but rather that they did not feel that given the political landscape it is a viable option in order to engage stakeholders who hold critical decision-making power over the orientation of the economy. This perspective assumes that the capitalist economy and its relations will be maintained, and proposed alternatives take a reformist approach. As Mike Wilson from the Smart Prosperity Institute- an organization that has assumed a green growth orientation - states:

We have very deliberately not chosen a degrowth paradigm for two reasons: a. I think it is very difficult to get broad based public and political buy in to the idea that we will have to shrink the economy, I think it is much easier to get political and public buy in for a viable and vibrant economy but with far less impact on the environment.

The embrace of neoliberalism by governments and the consolidation of corporate power has had an influence on environmental movements. Just as corporations have come to exert power over the wider economies of countries, so too have they had a role in financing ENGOs, and specific projects and programs to suit their interests (Dauvergne, 2016, p.127). In his book *Environmentalism of the Rich*, Peter Dauvergne (2016) traces how since the 1990s much of the environmental movement has come to reflect the interests of the rich. He writes:

In recent years, the priorities of big business, powerful economies and well-off consumers have taken center stage, while calls for frugality, quality of life, community wellbeing, social equality, corporate controls, limits on growth, and sustainable consumption have been pushed to the wings (p.141).

Indeed, over the past two decades we have seen the rise of ENGOS form partnerships with corporations guilty of some of the most devastating ecological degradation. As Clive Spash explains: “Greenwashing has become a major occupation for ENGOS. Many have become apologists for corporate self-regulation, market mechanisms, carbon pricing/trading and biodiversity offsetting/banking, while themselves commercialising species ‘protection’ as eco-tourism” (2017, p.404). This certainly arises in Canada, as one respondent shared: *every sector has environmental leaders, so Teck in mining, is a real leader.* Teck mining however is behind the proposed Frontier Oil Sands Mine Project, which would be the largest oil sand mine in the Alberta Tar sands. The proposed project area is over 24,000 hectares, and with the capacity to mine about 260,000 barrels per day of bitumen (CEAA, 2018). For this corporation to be seen as a leader is revealing of the heavy influence this sector can have in setting environmental standards, regulations, and on NGOs in Canada.

A theme some respondents expressed was the impact of NGO structures on Canadian movements, and the tendency of NGOs to promote reformism. As Harjap Grewal stated: *“it is not to say that there aren’t individuals within these organizations who don’t share these ideas, many of them do, but that these structures and how they operate limit the ability for a more grounded critique of capitalism and growth.”* This was echoed by one interviewee working at the grassroots level, who stated:

One distinction I have learnt over the years is the difference between NGO and grassroots organizations... and have really come to understand how both NGOs and grassroots organizations have their strengths and their weaknesses. My experience with NGOs is that they are absolutely not prepared to push the envelope, they are not prepared to attack the foundations of what it is that they are talking about, so at the top end dealing with the exchange of ideas, eliciting support, financial support, and creating an infrastructure around activism around these issues, so for me, in my humble experience, it is the grassroots organizations where the action is taking place and where the risks are taken.

Harjap Grewal shared with me that he felt that NGO hesitancy emerged as a consequence of the crisis nature of climate breakdown discourse that leads organizations to embrace solutions at all costs. For Grewal:

There is a very kind of doom and gloom approach to the point where we have heard from people that are close to the industry saying things like ‘corporations are best positioned to solve this crisis because they are more efficient and we can’t wait for government.’ So, this kind of rhetoric is out there and the crisis kind of moment of it is that Basically we should not use our imaginations to find the most just solutions because there is no time for that, we should only act with what we have. So, I feel that, that is one thing that makes it quite difficult on the ground because even progressive people that might be progressive on all sorts of other things even might have sort of a critique of corporations at a minimum, if not capitalism as a whole, are kind of falling into that in a sense that they are just looking for solutions right.

Furthermore, those who distance themselves from this sort of politics, in order to maintain a radical and anti-capitalist politics, expressed how challenging it was simply to maintain a sustainable organization. As Chelsea Fougere of Solidarity Halifax shared: *Solidarity Halifax is trying to survive as a non-sectarian, pluralist anti-capitalist organization so how to organize people, and how to have meetings in a way that is sustainable, has been a lot of the work to date.* This represents a major barrier, as the lack of capacity and resources that grassroots groups, who are mobilizing critiques shared by degrowth are currently limited in their ability to scale up activism and have wider influence on political institutions.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the barriers to degrowth according to 14 interviewees working in different contexts, and further explored by drawing on critical political economy scholarship. The barriers that emerged are: capitalism, neoliberalism, the consolidation of corporate power, the power of the fossil fuel industry specifically, increased social inequality and insecurity, and the sheer complexity of the issues. These combine to create a narrow political spectrum in

Canada where questioning growth remains off the table, and has meant that environmental organizing in some instances has adopted a neoliberal orientation itself. It is clear from this analysis that advancing a degrowth paradigm in Canada remains a trying task. All of my interviewees demonstrated the challenges of speaking on issues of climate and ecological breakdown and environmental policy in an ideological context that takes as a given that ‘growing the economy’ and ‘protecting the environment’ go hand in hand.

What is clear is that the politico-economic landscape in Canada is animated by neoliberal logics that work to support ongoing economic growth that accrues primarily to financial elites (Di Muzio, 2015). In the Canadian context the embrace of neoliberalism combined with the dominance of the fossil fuel industry presents specific challenges for degrowth. An important take-away is the need for greater attention within degrowth to how particular class interests are a massive barrier to realizing degrowth goals. As Drache (2014) observes:

business advocacy and insider lobbying by energy giants (and banks, too) have intensified. Their opposition to a sustainable national energy policy has for the time being succeeded in blocking a national environmental strategy, the litmus test of its power. (p.62).

This represents a daunting prospect, as our democracy prioritizes the interests of the already powerful over concerns for the health of people and biodiversity. Despite international calls to halt new development and to end government subsidies to the industry, Canada remains heavily invested in the ongoing development of the tar sands, and is one of the top subsidizers per capita of the industry within the G7 (Milman, 2016; Rabson, 2018a). The mindset is pervasive in Canada that the continued exploitation of its vast fossil fuel resources is in the ‘national interest’ and compatible with the prosperity of all Canadians (Tasker, 2018). At the time of writing the Canadian federal government is going ahead with the Trans Mountain Pipeline project that would bring 890 000 barrels of bitumen to export per day (NEB, 2018). This

would bring with it about “84 million tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere every year or 2.5 billion tonnes over 30 years” (Lee, 2018; Hughes, 2016). The project is going ahead despite strong protest and opposition mounted by Indigenous Nations who do not consent to the project running through their territories (Sharp, 2018; Ditchburn, 2018; Khelsilem, 2018; Hyland, 2018).

It is of course difficult to predict change; it is difficult to predict when and how flashpoints will emerge that produce ruptures, new narratives, and new political realities that before may have seemed an impossibility. However, what appears clear is that in order to move towards a degrowth politics, the hegemony of fossil capitalism in Canada, and the specific class interests that support it needs to be challenged. As David Harvey reminds us: “Capitalism will never fall on its own. It will have to be pushed. The accumulation of capital will never cease. It will have to be stopped. The capitalist class will never willingly surrender its power. It will have to be dispossessed (2010, 260). Any movement towards degrowth will require transforming power relations. While activists do not have all the answers, their experience tells us where the spaces to intervene might be. It is to this question that the next chapter turns.

Chapter 3- Pathways towards degrowth in Canada

“To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.” (Raymond Williams, 1989).

Introduction

This chapter turns now to explore the potential pathways for a movement towards degrowth in Canada. It is clear from the previous chapter that there remain significant barriers to the spread of a degrowth politics. As chapter 2 illustrated, there appears to date, little mainstream appetite to discuss the real risks that adhering to a growth economy holds in the face of climate breakdown. What is more, there are critical gaps in our understanding of how best to operationalize the degrowth frame. This has most recently been addressed in a new blog series on the website degrowth.info that focuses on strategies for socio ecological transformation. It states: “If degrowth is to remain an emancipatory concept, there is the need to both advance research on theories of transformation, as well as evaluate context-relevant strategy and policy proposals” (Petridis, 2019). This, I and others argue, is critical to the foundations of degrowth, and to any project that calls for such wide scale transformations of society. With this in mind, the goal of this thesis is to bring together and share the voices and experiences of those working towards transformative change in Canada to gain critical insight into how they are approaching the needed transition.

Degrowth as a formalized movement in Canada is marginal at best. However, there are still examples of actions, practices, interventions and debates that might not occur under a degrowth banner but that can advance politics, actions, and a vision of a just and sustainable future for all. A lack of political viability should not discourage a commitment to the possibilities

of deep transformation.⁵ It does however require that tactics are strategically considered to meet the particularities of the political and cultural climate. This means they must be grounded in the specific context and histories: of injustices, movements, and political processes etc. Examples of projects to build a more just and sustainable world were shared with me throughout the interview process. Jody Chan spoke of the ongoing initiative with The Leap and their project Reclaim Alberta, that is working for an industry-funded wide-scale clean-up of the thousands of oil and gas pads across the province. This is a community driven proposal to aid in the transition away from the fossil fuel economy by creating jobs for those in the oil and gas sector.⁶ Devlin Fernandes shared with me the work of Ecotrust Canada to build: *demonstration projects on what potential solutions could look like, so what does it look like to build a home on a First Nations reserve that takes into account energy sustainable, natural resource use, local skills to train people*. These represent just two examples that advance new ways of being in the world around the principles of participation, justice and ecological sustainability.

One thing that my interviews revealed is that the collective understanding of the barriers to degrowth came out much more clearly and concretely than the pathways to address them. While the path forward may not seem clear, there remain opportunities to strategically advance a degrowth politic in Canada. It is important to approach this challenge with an understanding that change is rarely linear or straightforward. As Rebecca Solnit writes on processes of social change: “sometimes it’s as complex as chaos theory, and as slow as evolution. Even things that seem to happen suddenly arise from deep roots in the past, or from long-dormant seeds” (2016,

⁵ I use Temper et al.’s definition of transformation, which they state “needs to reconfigure the structures of development through changing overarching global political economy dominated by neoliberal capitalism with increasing authoritarian tendencies in our day” (2018, p.751).

⁶ <https://theleap.org/reclaim-alberta/>

p.xxiv). There are always setbacks, bumps in the road, new and unexpected pathways and opportunities that open up that we might not have recognized beforehand. For these reasons, we have to embrace that despite our best efforts we are operating from a place of great uncertainty about how to bring about the change that we want. McNally reminds us “the present is invariably saturated with elements of the future, with possibilities that have not yet come to fruition, and may not do so- as the road to future is always contested” (2011, p.1). The difficult task ahead lies in creating, nurturing and amplifying emergent transformative processes.

In this vein, this chapter draws on interviews to address critical components for a degrowth transition in Canada. It focuses on the specific goals, requirements and priorities for movements and research that could move us towards degrowth. The focus of this chapter is less on the specific solutions that might be a part of a degrowth transitions (i.e. local currencies, housing cooperatives, time banks), but more so on how to increase the political viability of these sorts of proposals and projects in a highly uneven and contested political landscape. As such, it hopes to add to the degrowth literature by exploring not only the critical questions of why degrowth is so necessary- which is already a robust literature - but to reflect on *how* this might take place in the Canadian context given its histories, movements, and economic and political systems and structures.

My conversations with interviewees identified many concrete examples where they saw opportunities to advance the perspectives and goals of degrowth. The study interviewees identified many key priorities, requirements and strategies that together are considered possible and/or necessary pathways to build the sorts of movements that could increase the political acceptability and uptake of degrowth. These include: counter-hegemonic movement building; degrowth as a decolonial project; mass raising of class consciousness and economic literacy,

employing multiple frames and entry points to degrowth, rejecting a politics of purity, and adopting an action research agenda.

It is critical to stress that when speaking of degrowth's value as a paradigm in the Canadian context, I am not advocating for a degrowth movement to replace already existing movements. Rather, I approach this from the position that the transition beyond capitalism and its growth logics is necessary and will be inevitable as we confront the biophysical limits of the planet. I share the normative position advocated by the degrowth movement that this transition is best done through democratic means that prioritize justice and equality for all. Further, my contribution to the body of knowledge on degrowth must be kept in perspective: this thesis does not provide a blueprint for a degrowth movement in Canada, nor does this present a full picture of what is required. To fulfill the justice aims at the core of degrowth, this would undoubtedly have to emerge democratically and from communities. Instead, my goal is to add to this ongoing conversation of how to build the movement for degrowth, and the sorts of requirements, strategies, visions, narratives that can be mobilized in the face of massive imbalances of power.

Counter-hegemonic movement building for degrowth

What is evident from my research is that expanding the political acceptability of degrowth requires new ways of organizing, and mobilizing people to build the movements and momentum that can mount alternatives capable of transforming capitalism. And, there are many communities across Canada who recognize this. As Jody Chan shared about their work at the Leap:

It is clear that people at the community level are really ready for radical change and especially folks on the frontlines fighting, they know the kinds of changes that are necessary and the kinds of solutions required, so it is more about building the people power and trying to understand how all of this really amazing local action happening around the country can add up to national level changes that are scalable and replicable.

Crucial to a number of my interviewees, such as Chan, is the question of how to bring together the sorts of solidarities, coalitions and alliances across Canada that can build political influence to make the changes that need to happen? One of the frustrations that was shared with me by a few respondents is that some organizing and movement building in Canada is limited in its ability to affect deep structural change, and is more focused on single issue campaigns. This, of course, is not criticism of these campaigns per se; there are very practical reasons for single issue campaigning, including limited funding, capacity, resources, and the sheer scale and challenge of it all. However, as Bob Thomson of Degrowth Canada reflected:

Somehow, we have to create the conditions where there is a big tent where people can talk about- instead of arguing about who has more angels on the head of their pin, and instead celebrate the fact that they are all angels and not criticize everybody. My generation always used to joke, if your left-wing organization grew to the point where you couldn't hold your annual general meeting in a telephone booth, you had to split, and so you have people splitting off on the most minor sectarian sorts of issues. And this crisis that we are facing are such that we cannot afford to be fighting with each other, we should be not just fighting capitalism, but building alternatives that are constructive and positive.

To make any progress, and in the face of the massive concentrations of wealth and power, building wide and inclusive coalitions needs to be prioritized. This means focusing on building solidarities and alliances across movements in Canada. Richard Swift offered some important insights, and a potential pathway forward, drawing on and speaking to Gramsci's concept of hegemony and counter hegemony. He shared:

The fact is we have radical problems, so we need radical solutions. We can't have radical problems and piecemeal, minimal measures to deal with the radical problem. So, I think that is one of the advantages of the degrowth paradigm is it presents radical solutions. I am interested in the Gramscian term of "hegemony," because we are trying to gain some degree of hegemony for radical political ecology as the only really possible way forward in this crisis situation

The concept of hegemony and counter hegemony help to make sense of what is required for a movement such as degrowth. As such, I flesh these concepts out below drawing from the relevant academic literature.

Hegemony.

Italian scholar and activist Antonio Gramsci defined common sense as the “uncritical and largely unconscious way(s) of perceiving and understanding the world that has become common; in any given epoch” (Gramsci, 1971, p.322). Said differently, common sense refers to what is culturally viewed as the ‘normal’ and unquestioned way one lives life that emerges out of everyday practices and relationships among people in their particular environments (Torres, 2013; Garcia Lopez, Velicu & D’Alisa, 2017). Hegemony then refers to the process of shaping and building these common-sense understandings, expectations, thoughts, and practices of a given society (Huber, 2013). Critical to the concept of hegemony is that the elite gain and maintain their positions of power not simply through force, but through their ability to build the consent to rule among society. This is done through constructing narratives that are understood as universal, so that ‘the ideas of the ruling elite become the ideas of society’ (Carroll, 2016b; Ekers, Loftus & Mann, 2009).

This implies that the views, beliefs, and practices that govern and shape everyday life, while presented and perceived as neutral, are not. Rather, they are socially and politically constructed narratives and understandings of the world, and thus are open to change and interpretation (Wanner, 2015; Dryzek, 2005; Smucker, 2017). This is important, because as Alexis Shotwell observes “the narrative we use to explain the world structures what we do in it.” (2016, p.100).

Today, the concept of hegemony is useful in unpacking the manners in which neoliberal capitalism (the most common barrier mentioned through my interviews and addressed in chapter two) has become embedded in everyday understandings of life- from work, family, play, community, freedom, the role of government, etc. (Haluzá-Delay, 2012; McNally, 2016). So ubiquitous is neoliberal capitalism that Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) argue that:

If our era is dominated by one hegemonic ideology, it is that of neoliberalism. It is widely assumed that the most effective way to distribute goods and services is by allowing instrumentally rational individuals to exchange via the market...today, this vision of how economies should operate is what both its critics and proponents take as a baseline. Neoliberalism sets the agenda for what is realistic, necessary, and possible (p.51).

For those seeking deep, transformative change, it is thus critical to understand and unpack current hegemonic narratives and the ways they/we imagine our world. Today, it is the ideas and narratives produced by the capitalist class that have a major sway on what is assumed possible or impossible (Wanner, 2015). By understanding the current hegemonic narratives that guide our socio-economic lives, we are better equipped to challenge and replace them.

Counter-hegemony.

Gramsci's concept of counter hegemony is useful in thinking about what may be required to realize degrowth. Gramsci clarified that people have the ability to both contest and change the common sense through counter hegemonic projects (Gramsci, 1971; Karriem, 2009). Counter hegemonic projects seek to challenge and disrupt the current order by offering an alternative vision and the possibility to transform everyday life (Garcia Lopez et al., 2017; Srnicek & Williams, 2015). What might building a counter hegemonic project entail? Hubert Buch-Hansen reminds us:

Political projects do not become hegemonic just because they embody good ideas. For a project to become hegemonic, organic intellectuals first need to develop the project and a

constellation of social forces with sufficient power and resources to implement it, then needs to find it appealing and struggle for it (2018, p.160).

Clarifying Gramsci's concept of counter hegemonic projects, Alexandros Kioupkiolis (2018) importantly highlights that they "valued plurality within the counter-hegemonic bloc and...aimed at a collective will which would be shaped through an equal interaction and a mutual transformation of all involved parties rather than through the imposition of one subject upon the other" (p.103).

The construction of a counter hegemonic project can be understood as proceeding through three connected phases: deconstruction, construction, and consolidation (Overbeek, 1990; Buch Hansen, 2018). The deconstruction phase occurs by sowing doubt in the current hegemonic order, illuminating its contradictions in an effort to undo its credibility and legitimacy (Buch Hansen, 2018). In the construction phase, work is done to build the credibility for new ideas as politically legitimate. This is followed by the consolidation phase where "crucial path dependencies are created. Interests become entrenched, ideologies become internalized, and in this manner, institutional and ideological blockages arise that prevent an adequate response to emerging contradictions in later phases" (Overbeek & Apeldoorn, 2012, p. 7; cited in Buch Hansen, 2018)

The degrowth movement is arguably actively engaged in a battle of ideas to replace those currently animated by neoliberal capitalism. This is happening in a highly uneven political landscape, where the consequences of forty years of neoliberalization has given rise to the massive concentrations of power and wealth, the erosion of the power and autonomy of communities, and of states to intervene and shape their economies. The current logics of the neoliberal system continue to consolidate power, increase inequality through violent austerity measures, undermine climate policy and reinforces ongoing economic growth. These logics and

rationalities of neoliberal, growth-based capitalism will not fall on their own, but will have to be confronted head-on and dismantled. The ongoing challenge for the degrowth movement is how to engage with and confront politics and power, and “not just wash our individual hands of the whole corrupt business” (Smucker, 2017, p.142). Degrowth will be better positioned to do the difficult work of crafting the new world out of the shell of the old by embracing an expansive understanding of alternatives. One important approach that Chelsea Fougere of Solidarity Halifax spoke to is moving beyond a reform/radical binary that can grip movements. Instead, there must be a recognition where both radical and transformational actions can work alongside a more incremental or reform strategy to strengthen the power and reach of the movement and improve overall wellbeing (Rowe & Carroll, 2014). Fougere shared:

I am pretty much game for using whatever tools are in the arsenal. Ultimately, I want to see revolution, but in the meantime, I am not against reform if that is going to make things better. Because you know we might not get the revolution tomorrow, but if people can get a livable wage tomorrow please. So, I want to see big change, but that doesn't mean that I am going to get in anybody's way if they are going to try to do more immediate changes

On this front, Rowe and Carroll (2014) offer further insights, observing how: “The uncertainties of transformational and incremental strategies in advanced capitalist societies marked by massive concentrations of power are conditions favoring social movement dynamism” (p.150). They define social movement dynamism as the outcomes that can arise from different activist groups working and interacting along a spectrum of radical to reform, “to increase overall movement power” (Rowe & Carroll, 2014, p.149). Related to this, D’Alisa et al., (2013) identify a continuum of degrowth actors from the more reformist actors: i.e. public authorities, political parties, civil society organizations, trade unions, to the more radical grassroots social movements, and the differing roles they can play in their respective capacities to advance certain degrowth goals and objectives. To successfully pursue degrowth, it is

important to recognize the specific goals and roles that different actors can play, and how to make the most of the particular roles and contexts diverse actors operate in.

Andre Gorz's concept of non-reformist reforms is helpful here. Writing in the 1960's, Gorz distinguished non-reformist reforms as those that create the conditions for transforming the system over maintaining it (Belliveau et al., 2019, forthcoming). He identified three features of a non-reformist reforms: 1) They should be disruptive of the status quo of capitalism, 2) should focus on building people power, and allow for activist learning in the process of working towards the reform, and, 3) should be part of a longer-term plan tied to transformative change (Gorz, 1977; Belliveau et al., 2019, forthcoming). While there are no perfect criteria for distinguishing between transformative reforms and those which support the status quo, Gorz's criteria can help radical actors within degrowth identify where there may be opportunities to work with reform-oriented actors for strategic gains. It is also important to push the more reformist actors towards taking more radical actions to challenge growth logics, in order to shift the discourses and narratives of what is politically possible and acceptable to be more embracing of degrowth debates. In this way, it can be possible to create better coalitions and solidarities that recognize and harness the broad roles actors can play in creating a strong counter hegemonic movement for degrowth.

Employing Multiple frames and entry points

Building political momentum requires a broad base of people willing to act, to vote in certain ways, engage in certain actions that are appealing, and that will produce more desirable ways of life. As Guy Dauncey notes,

Every successful social movement has had a positive vision. So, what the new economy movement needs is a clearly articulated vision that is colourful, bright and powerful, backed by solid evidence. And the evidence is there.

A movement that is interested in producing real change means that it is not only about communicating the truths and realities of where we find ourselves and the sorts of actions we need, but to do so in ways that are compelling, that speak to many people with many different goals and needs, and draw them in. On this Michelle Molnar of the David Suzuki Foundation told me:

I think there has to be more than one frame, right? This isn't just the domain and mandate of academics and economists, you know, there's many disciplines and different reasons that it makes sense for us to think about, and go back and reconceive of what our economy is doing for us right? So, we created macroeconomics in the 1930s, right, it is not this given, it is not natural law, we can go back and look at what it does for our life on different fronts - so it might be a health framing, it might be an inequality framing, it might be a risk framing, a climate change framing.

This means that we must always work to think of creative, and adaptive ways to communicate to a broad base and far-reaching group of interests, and recognize that doing so compellingly will have to take many forms. One strength of degrowth as a broad paradigm is that it encompasses many potential entry points to begin questioning the dominant norms and assumptions that currently structure everyday life. As well, degrowth analysis offers the systemic analysis to connect local struggles to the wider systems and structures that produce them. Richard Swift suggests that:

we need to find ways to speak to people's subconscious - the things that we know are lurking there, but are not near the surface. I think there is a way in which people are kind of dominated by the common sense of the system, but that we are actually much more complex than that, so we have to speak to other parts of them, that gets beyond the common sense of the system.

There are many narratives and framing approaches that interviewees have had rhetorical success with, such as simplicity narratives. Swift also shared:

I think there is greater openness here to simplicity in living -- having more free time and less labour time, having more self-activity and less wage labour. So, I think there is an openness there. A lot of people are dissatisfied with the economic treadmill they are on,

and which results in a lot of pressurized lives and depression and mental illness. So, there is an underlying unease about the quality of our society, and the quality of daily life, I think that the degrowth movement has the potential of tapping into that, whether or not it is using the word degrowth or not..... So, people who are advocates have to say this isn't necessarily the way it has to be, there are other possibilities. So, I think there are potentials in that area to really make progress.

This also might mean finding ways to draw in and build upon pre-existing discourses and movements. For example, at the time of writing (January 2019) there is renewed and growing mainstream attention in North American media for a Green New Deal (GND). Led by the Sunrise movement⁷ and championed by members of the Democratic Party, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, they are calling for a government led economic stimulus plan to transition to an 100% renewable economy while also addressing concerns of social justice, and jobs (Roberts, 2018; Friedman, 2019). The plan calls for a Just Transition- that is one that prioritizes the communities on the front lines of climate breakdown, as well as the workers that will most impacted, and seeks to address long-standing social inequalities. The plan also seeks to ensure the protection and enforcement of the “sovereign rights and land rights of tribal nation” and “includes additional measures such as basic income programs, and universal health care programs.”⁸ In Canada there have also been calls for and organizing around a Canadian Green New Deal (Hussan, 2019; Thomas-Müller, 2018; Ball 2019). While the GND currently does not address critical questions of economic growth, many of the specific policies it proposes are in line with the reforms degrowth also advocates for. This includes wide-scale funding of renewable energy, basic incomes, free post-secondary education, prioritizing workers’ rights, and frontline communities. These types of critical reforms may indeed represent “leverage points for

⁷ The Sunrise movement is an organization of young people in the US working to make the climate crisis a top priority. Their principles and organizing strategy can be found at: <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/about>

⁸ This comes from the Draft text for proposed addendum to house rules for the 116th congress of the United States found at: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jxUzp9SZ6-VB-4wSm8sselVMsqWZrSrYpYC9sIHKLzo/edit>

systemic interventions to facilitate degrowth” (Videira, et al., 2014, p58). As Jody Chan told me that a goal of the work at the Leap is to: *expand what is possible*, and move *the goalposts of what is politically realistic*, what is required is *to build that people power and like actual influence and political clout*. While we may still not be able to critically discuss growth in mainstream culture and politics, there are still opportunities to make strategic moves to support policy and change that could move us closer to a place where this could be possible- and the emerging Green New Deal is just one concrete example of where this is already happening.

Degrowth as a decolonial project

One finding that emerged clearly from many interviews was that working towards meaningful degrowth is not possible without taking an explicitly decolonial approach. As a settler colonial state, Canada has been built on a system and structures that Potawatomi scholar Dr. Kyle Whyte writes “involves the settler society seeking to fully establish itself in that territory according to its own cultural and political systems, which requires erasing the Indigenous population” (2016, p.5). Resurgence and resistance to the colonial state through defense of land, water and lifeways has been ongoing by Indigenous nations since the arrival of settlers. More recently, resurgence movements in Canada, such as Idle no More, have brought attention to the devastating impacts of state supported economic development on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous communities (Barker, 2015). Indigenous-led movements bring to the fore the ways that economic growth and capitalist expansion in Canada continue to require the dispossession of land and lifeways of Indigenous communities (Coulthard, 2013). On the power of these movements, settler Canadian activists carla bergam and Nick Montgomery write:

Indigenous resurgence implicates us, as settlers, in complicated ways: it unsettles us and our relationships to land and place, and it throws into question received ideas about who we are, our responsibilities and complicities, what it means to live here, and our received

ideas about what 'here' is. It compels us to learn, together, how to support Indigenous resurgence and resist colonial violence (2017, p.73).

These dynamics have played out most recently in the Trans Mountain pipeline dispute where the Federal Government continues to support the pipeline project despite the Supreme Court ruling against the approval process as failing to meaningfully consult with the First Nations who have always opposed the project running through their territory (Spriggs, 2018).

Many of my interviewees noted the critical role that Indigenous resurgence is having in reshaping and transforming the political landscape in Canada. Devlin Fernandes of Eco Trust shared:

Indigenous communities, and in particular Indigenous youth, are going to be such an asset in the of transformation of our country and bringing ideas, and political power and energy and voice to some of these issues.

Rachel Malena-Chan stated:

Where I am most energized in my work is learning more about Indigenous ways of knowing and more about reciprocity with the environment, because it is the big picture repositioning of what people are, the role that human agents play in the planet's systems and in our relationships.

There is great risk within degrowth that proposals could leave unanswered the questions of land rights and title moving forward, and hence represent yet another case of settlers exerting their dominance over the land, maintaining ongoing colonialism. In the Canadian context, the pursuit of economic growth is intimately tied to the ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands and people. In a settler context, Matt Hern and Am Johal state: "The root of the genocidal rationalities colonized people face is always the attempt to eliminate connections to the land: to dislodge, exterminate, and/ or assimilate people and their subjectivities- sometimes gently, most often brutally- into enforcing narratives of progress and modernization, private property and markets, states and borders." (2018, p.13).

Canada has symbolically entered a period of reconciliation, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau claiming that there is no relationship more important than that between the Canadian state and First Nations.⁹ Yet, what this means in practice remains highly contested (Gordon, 2018). At the same time, the Federal government continues to pursue an extractivist agenda on Indigenous lands in the name of economic growth (Deranger, 2018). With 17% of Canada's GDP coming from natural resources in 2017, representing 47% of the total value of Canada's merchandise export, (NRCAN, 2018) the growth imperatives of capitalism in Canada continue to involve the exploitation of resources, despite the resistance of Indigenous nations (Deranger, 2018). Economic growth and the capitalist economy in Canada are facilitated through the ongoing dispossession, colonization and exploitation of Indigenous lands to transform natural elements into commodities for profit (Coulthard, 2013). Moving beyond capitalism, and to an economy beyond growth, such as degrowth is necessary to reduce the harms of the Canadian state (Coulthard, 2013).

So, while degrowth may support processes of reconciliation, given the complex and entwined histories of the colonial state, it is not enough to assume that pursuing degrowth alone will lead to Indigenous reconciliation, or self-determination, or improve the material conditions of many Indigenous communities today. Rather, to meet the justice goals underpinning degrowth, any degrowth project in the Canadian context must be informed by and working explicitly towards decolonization. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, too easily do settlers mobilize decolonization as a metaphor as an “attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (p.1). They go on to write:

decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already

⁹ His full address can be found at: <https://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2017/06/21/statement-prime-minister-canada-national-aboriginal-day>

been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically. This is precisely why decolonization is necessarily unsettling, especially across lines of solidarity (2012, p. 7).

Following Tuck and Yang and three of my interviewees working at the grassroots level, I want to advocate for a clearer critique of economic growth that articulates how the pursuit of surplus value is inseparable from processes of colonization in Canada. Degrowth has helped to challenge narratives that associate growth with progress and development. However, there remains a need to address and debunk the violence that the pursuit of, and attachment to, economic growth has had on Indigenous communities. There is also a need to address the many social inequalities created by capitalism and colonialism – that has worked to dehumanize groups of people to serve as cheap or free sources of labour, and dispossess them from their land and livelihoods in order to fulfill the need for expansion and growth (Pellow, 2007, Federici, 2004). Building the just and equitable and plural societies that degrowth envisions, means actively engaging in dismantling “the colonial strategies that interfere with our environmental responsibilities, rights to self-determined adaptation to environmental change, and rights to reject industrial, capitalist and colonial values” (Whyte, 2016, p.12). This will transform the objectives and proposals of degrowth to include supporting Indigenous sovereignty, rights and title to land, and resisting ongoing colonial structures as fundamental components of degrowth in Canada.

Raising class consciousness and economic literacy

One finding of this research is that in order to do this work—to build the sorts of solidarities that are required while also ensuring that the visions and goals remain radical— there is a need for wide scale public awareness raising about class structures and economic systems.

As Harjap Grewal shared with me:

I think what we see with the climate movement- we don't question who is in the room, and that a certain class of people actually benefit from maintaining the economic order. But, if you add a class analysis to this, the conversation becomes clear, because how do you get somebody with ruling class interests to say that a corporate capitalist solution is not viable, how do you get that when class interests exist within that system, right? And so, I think this is kind of the big question that myself and a few people have been grappling with is- that there has been this kind of erosion of class consciousness which otherwise would inform these dialogues much more clearly.

He went on to share: *There needs to be a raising of a class analysis... that consciousness just allows people to recognize different interests in any room on a group of people.* An important strategy is focus on popular education to make legible our economic systems and institutions, and to draw connections between economic decisions and their impact on ecologies, the climate, and our day to day life. Degrowth scholars can continue to play an important role to bring this work outside of academic circles, and beyond academic journals that are not accessible to those working in various capacities in environmental organizing, let alone the public at large.

Raising this consciousness can also help counter narratives that all are equally to blame for climate breakdown because we have to drive a car to work, or work in the energy industry in order to secure basic needs. The “we are all to blame” narrative blocks an understanding of climate breakdown as produced by a small minority of capitalists who have profited greatly from the plundering of fossil fuels and other resources, and who continuously use that profit to lobby governments against action to address climate breakdown (Laville, 2019). Pursuing this shift in orientation can help build a movement that appeals to working class interests, which will be important to build the sort of mass movement that will be required. Matthew Huber writes:

Why does this matter for climate politics? Because, for the most part, our entire political strategy on climate change as it exists now does not appeal to working class concerns. On the one hand, many climate policies are largely “technocratic” fixes that aim to tweak market incentives in ways opaque to working class sensibilities. Try explaining a “cap and trade” system to your average person (I have a hard-enough time teaching this material). More problematically, one could argue climate policies often appear antagonistic to struggling workers. Taxes, fees, and “internalizing costs” are the language

of the policies. If anyone in the climate debate appears to be advocating for working people it is the right who often claim climate policies will “cost” everyday people dearly. (2018).

Degrowth proponents and actors need to push to expand beyond having the ‘best’ or most ‘rigorous’ diagnosis and analysis of the problems. What is required are solutions that offer tangible material improvements to people, so that they are willing to work and fight for the solutions. In focusing and prioritizing inclusivity and wellbeing, degrowth has many proposals that do just that (Koch, 2018). What is key is understanding the specific concerns of everyday people in their communities and tailoring degrowth proposals to meet these concerns and provide tangible benefits.

Rejecting a politics of purity

An important dynamic that an interviewee brought up, and that is a part of a wider debate in approaching environmentalism, is how to build more inclusive movements that draw in people beyond those already engaged and on board. This concern was shared by Jody Chan, who said:

How do we communicate these ideas about capitalism, and racial justice, and intersectionality, but communicate in a way that is inviting people to join the movement and not have it be a barrier of entry to have a certain amount of ideological purity? How can we bring people in who are at different points in their journey of learning about these concepts? And it’s challenging, because I think there is tendency within movements to signal how radical your politics are by using all the right words, and listing all the right things every time, but actually that can be sort of detrimental to communicating, and clarity, and storytelling.

The impact that this sort of discourse can have was further expressed to me by Chelsea Fougere who shared:

One thing I have found very frustrating about anti-capitalist politics is often it is so theoretical and academic - it is almost bougie in itself and it is frustrating and alienating to the people that they are supposed to be mobilizing

Instead, I want to advocate for an approach and philosophy of degrowth that is, in the words of Alexis Shotwell, “against purity.” For Shotwell:

(Against purity) champions the usefulness of thinking about the complicity and compromise as a starting point of action. Often there is an implicit or explicit idea that in order to live authentically or ethically we ought to avoid complicity, we do better to start from an assumption that everyone is implicated in situations we (at least in some way) repudiate. We are compromised and we have made compromises, and this will continue to be the way we craft the worlds to come, whatever, they might turn out to be (2016: 5).

What this means in practice is recognizing that given our current power structures, we have to be highly attentive to who can live out the radical alternatives that degrowth proposes, and who might face barriers in doing so. Onofrio Romano (2012) has highlighted that specific voluntary simplicity currents of degrowth thinking run the risk of perpetuating this sort of purity. He highlights that certain tenets of thought in practice can follow a neoliberal orientation of individualism- where every individual is responsible for adopting a new more sustainable lifestyle. He writes:

It belongs to a path of political action that leads activists to secede from the public arena where the majority of people lie in order to build a small world together with those who only share the same values and visions. Obeying to this path, an elite, most 'aware' of the necessity of degrowth, will give the good example, staging degrowth practices, here and now, without waiting to 'take power.' Degrowthers promote simplicity experiences, collective and personal, engage in voluntary simplicity circles, found small degrowth or other eco communities, all done in the hope that their practical virtue will stand out so obviously and infect the rest of the citizens, those "poor ones" who are still unaware. This action is not political in the traditional sense of the term. Degrowthers do not pretend to participate in the competition for the conquest of institutions (Romano, 2012, 568).

This of course speaks to only one branch of degrowth thinking, and since its publication in 2012 there has been increased work in degrowth to build and enhance the systemic critiques within degrowth. However, Romano offers important cautionary advice, particularly in the application of degrowth policies and proposals on the ground.

What building a movement that is 'against purity' means is moving beyond individualistic-oriented environmentalism and degrowth proposals, to recognize that we are all implicated in extractivist economies in various degrees, and that it is often a privilege to be able

to distance oneself from them. This approach does not reprimand individuals caught up living in systems that produce violence and degradation. It moves beyond that to look at the structural changes that can and must take place to transform these systems that many of us do not willingly want to maintain as such. This is very different than watering down politics, losing its radical nature and goals, or rejecting certain behaviors, institutions, structures etc. Rather, it recognizes that in order to get to where we need to be, and to build the sorts of inclusive movements we need, means embracing the complex and contradictory entanglements that we are all caught up in, and that shape our ability to act, rather than rejecting certain actions, actors outright as not being radical enough. In turn, this will allow for movement spaces that can foster deep learning, and transformation.

Action research agenda

A specific question I asked all of my interviewees was how academic research, and degrowth scholars could support movements and organizations. Ben Isitt shared:

Working with social movements, so identifying if there are local groups working on this stuff, to figure out how the research can be of use to them, and then, that is challenging, it is always challenging because you have the cycle of academic studies, it is invariably hard.

Both Devlin Fernandes of Ecotrust Canada and Jody Chan from the Leap shared the importance that partnerships between professors and community groups or organizations can have in producing long-term benefits for both the professor and the social movement and communities they are embedded in. Jody Chan said:

I think the most helpful researchers, or the most helpful roles for researchers to play are when they are deeply embedded in those organizations or those movements in other ways, and so they have relationships, and ongoing relationships with people there, and are sort of in dialogue with what is needed and responsive to that. To me it is very relational, relationship based.

For degrowth researchers, I believe there are strategic roles that those in academic spheres can play in supporting projects and research agendas that support more radical movements. When asked about how to support projects that may not have a lot of public or political popularity

Devlin Fernandes shared:

I think there is something to be said for being able to test ideas without a lot of fanfare, to run projects under the radar. Especially when you are trying something new, there are always going to be naysayers, so if you start out at the beginning and really broadcast what you are doing, it might be detrimental to what you are doing because people could come out against it, and put up barriers. Here if you work under the surface a little bit, you can figure out where you get support, you can try and build some relationships among those parties, and you can put a few things into practice before you try and grow it or scale it or replicate it.

What Fernandes recommends, could be done through academic-NGO partnerships that benefit both researchers and NGOs, helping to maintain and keep them viable. Community engaged projects may not have the political or financial support to test ideas otherwise. Furthermore, these types of partnerships can strengthen the relevance of degrowth research, to ensure that it does not stay only within the academy. Kate Driscoll Derickson and Paul Routledge's (2015) resources for scholar activism provide a useful guide for how researchers can develop a triangulated approach to research. This approach considers the demands of academic knowledge production, while "devising research questions with a strong ethical and political commitment to engaged research and scholar activism" (Derickson & Routledge, 2015, p. 2). The three questions they believe should drive research are: "what are the current theoretical debates or intellectual questions?, what publics and institutional projects are served by knowing, and what do non-academic collaborators want to know?" (2015, p.2). They further elaborate on the importance of a politics of resourcefulness, that prioritizes supporting the maintenance of

movements. On the specific ways they believe scholar-activists can engage in a politics of resourcefulness, they write:

First, scholar-activists can commit to channeling the resources and privileges afforded academics (time, access to research, technology and space, grant writing experience; expertise legible to new organisations) to advance the work of non-academic collaborators (community groups, activist networks, local insurgencies, etc.) second, resourcing can take the form of research designed explicitly to ask and answer questions that non-academic collaborators want to know. Finally, a politics of resourcefulness suggests the need for research that explores barriers to sustained and active participation in activism (2015, p.1).

What is crucial is to continue to implement new and innovative ways for academic research and institutions to support and complement the work of movements. This is necessary to see degrowth move beyond academia.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored pathways towards degrowth. These include: building a counter hegemonic degrowth movement; degrowth as a decolonial project; avoiding the politics of purity; raising class consciousness and economic literacy; employing multiple frames as entry points into degrowth debates, and adopting an action research agenda.

I, and some of those that I interviewed, who have attended degrowth conferences share the belief that the spaces and ideas encompassed under degrowth have the potential, and indeed already are bringing people together across academic fields, social movements and campaigns. For example, the degrowth conference in Mexico in September 2018 had a strong academic presence from diverse disciplines including: economics, political science, philosophy, business, anthropology, history, engineering, gender studies, sociology, psychology, political ecology, law, post development studies, post-colonial studies, geography, and chemistry, to name a few.¹⁰

¹⁰ For an overview of some of the keynote speakers see: <https://degrowth.descrecimiento.org/conferencistas>

There was also strong presence of grassroots organizers and journalists also working on diverse issues and from every continent. This included Indigenous activists, land defenders, and feminist groups. This is representative of the Degrowth project at large. Bringing people together to build solidarities and advance systemic perspectives that work towards deep structural change is an intentional component of the degrowth project. As leading voice on degrowth Federico Demaria states: “degrowth is not the alternative, but rather a matrix of alternatives that opens the human adventure to a plurality of destinies and spaces for creativity, while removing the lead blanket of economic totalitarianism” (2019). As such, degrowth is a paradigm that provides a diagnosis of the problems and connects it to a broad base of actions, interventions, actors, and movements (D’Alisa, et al., 2013). It creates some common language and goals to bring together people and groups working in different capacities on similar issues, to situate their work in the bigger picture, while orienting towards the root causes of our social and ecological crises.

What is clear from this chapter is that there is still much work to do in Canada to advance degrowth as necessary and desirable. Though hope should not be lost, as I hope this chapter has illustrated, there are organizations, communities, and individuals committed to working towards a more just and sustainable future for us all, who are continuing to wrestle with the critical questions of how this can and should be done.

Chapter 4- Conclusion

“Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out” (Vaclav Havel, 1986).

Introduction

There is growing recognition that wide-scale transformations to bring the global economic system in line with the biophysical limits of the planet are necessary (Kallis, Kostakis, Lange, Muraca, Paulson, & Schmelzer, 2018). Despite this, there remains a huge gap in understanding how to politically mobilize the solutions emerging out of the degrowth movement - to make them a reality on the ground. This thesis sought to address this gap by exploring three overarching research questions in the Canadian context: 1) What barriers exist to advancing a degrowth agenda in Canada? 2) How specifically do those barriers block degrowth from taking hold in contemporary policy and political discourse in Canada? 3) How (if at all) are contemporary Canadian activists seeking to address these barriers?

To answer these questions, I interviewed activists and actors working on the ground for solutions to climate breakdown across Canada. I privileged their voices and perspectives for the insights they offer to the questions of both why degrowth appears largely absent from political discourse, and how degrowth perspectives may or may not fit in with their strategies and goals. I also engaged their insights in conversation with scholarly work in critical political economy that has bearing on the “how to” question facing the degrowth literature.

I divided my analysis into three chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the challenges that degrowth seeks to address, an overview of degrowth literatures, and the research methods and methodologies of this research. Chapter 2 explores the barriers to operationalizing degrowth that actors working in Canada experience, and Chapter 3 explores the pathways they offered to

working towards degrowth. To conclude, I will bring these themes together and offer a summary of the answers to my overall research questions, drawing out the key takeaways from both interviewees' perspectives and the critical literatures that inform this research.

1. What barriers exist to advancing a degrowth agenda in Canada?

Respondents actively trying to operationalize degrowth spoke of difficulties they encountered in attempting to bring degrowth into the mainstream. They told stories of efforts to get progressive politicians on board, and to at least discuss the role of growth in the economy, only to be dismissed as 'political suicide'. For some other respondents, while they saw the importance of degrowth, and expressed their interest in it, they shared that currently pursuing degrowth was not perceived as viable within the goals and objectives of their organizations.

These challenges were attributed to a number of barriers: Canada as a capitalist state; the impacts of neoliberalism; growing inequality; the increasing power of corporations in general and the oil and gas industry in particular; and, the sheer complexity of the interconnected challenges climate breakdown presents, and the solutions. The Canadian political economy presents particular barriers to advancing degrowth, both in the current structures and systems of policy and political discourse, and in environmental movements and the orientations that activists take. One challenge that was named is the narrow political spectrum in Canada where federal and political government policies and programs tend to align more closely with that of industry. Currently in Canada there exists very little space in the political mainstream to critique or even raise questions about economic growth and its desirability. The frame of debate around climate breakdown is heavily influenced by the fossil fuel industry in particular and their economic ambitions to mine more oil and build pipeline networks to export it abroad. This narrow political spectrum around issues of climate and environment has also had an influence on

environmental organizing. As was raised by some activists interviewed for this thesis, there is a tendency towards single issue campaigns which tend to be a-theoretical; they do not address underlying systemic causes. This does not mean that the activists working in this arena do not have a critique of capitalism and economic growth, or bring a climate justice perspective to their work. Rather, the current structures of many organizations lean towards gradual reform. In part, it was conveyed to me that this emerged out of the dire nature of climate breakdown where there can be a tendency to embrace solutions at all costs, even if this requires making deep compromises with the corporate sector. The organizations that advocate for a more radical transformative politics tend to be smaller, and grassroots, where sustaining the organization is an ongoing challenge, and scaling up their influence remains a daily struggle.

2. How specifically do those barriers block degrowth from taking hold in contemporary policy and political discourse?

When distilled, what emerges is that the political economy of fossil fuels and prevalence of neoliberal ideology produces specific challenges in Canada where powerful interests continue to thwart progress towards addressing climate breakdown. The science shows that in order to remain within the 2°C threshold, Canada must leave 75% of all coal reserves, 74% of oil reserves and 24% of gas reserves undeveloped and underground (Foster, 2017). This would require a massive transformation of the Canadian economy and of societies. Yet, Canada's current commitments put forward as part of the Paris Climate Accord puts the country on track to 5.1 °C of warming by 2100 (Climate Action Tracker, 2018; du Pont & Meinshausen, 2018).

As I highlight in chapter two, the political economy in Canada, and the way that is expressed in concentrations of elite and corporate power have given certain actors, particularly the fossil fuel industry, immense power that permeates multiple levels of society- from the economy, politicians, and the public, who continue to thwart progressive action on climate

breakdown, and which serves as a barrier to the political acceptability of degrowth. As Satgar (2014) points out: the political economy is shaped by powerful social forces that continue to work to “maintain a neoliberal capitalist order and strive to assimilate and tame anti-systemic challenges” (2). This creates a political economy that is ‘divided into two blocs – the plutonomies, where economic growth is powered by and largely consumed by the wealthy few, and the rest’ (Citigroup, 2006 quoted in Di Muzio, 2015, p.143). In order to maintain and grow this economic power, these elites use their resources to exert political power to support their interests. In Canada, this is partially expressed by the pervasive mindset in Canadian politics that the continued exploitation of its vast fossil fuel resources is in the ‘national interest’ and compatible with the prosperity of all Canadians (Tasker, 2018).

As previously noted in chapter two, the oil and gas industry in Canada comprises up to a third of the GDP in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland, and well as approximately ten percent of the overall Canadian GDP (Carter, 2014). What is more, as Gunster, Szeman, Greaves and Neubauer (2018) notes:

(Canadian) Governments at all levels have, to varying degrees, recognized climate change as a political priority. Yet many also continue to champion carbon extraction and export as essential to Canadian economic growth and prosperity. Some in the oil and gas sector admit that regimes of energy regulation and governance need to be modified to address global warming (through, for instance, the imposition of carbon taxes), but many also insist upon the long-term viability of the fossil fuel industry, and our continuing dependence upon it in everyday life. In Canada, as in other countries rich in fossil fuels, there is a concerted struggle over energy, one that pits industry and government against First Nations, environmental groups, and local communities. Industry and government proposals to expand carbon infrastructure—even in the face of the decline of global energy prices, the extraordinary growth of renewables, and the scale, pace, and intensity of climate change (p.3).

In Canada there is a tight network of highly integrated elites, between the fossil fuel sector, finance who hold unprecedented economic power, and who have a vested interest in supporting the ongoing development of the oil and gas industry (Carroll & Huijzer, 2018; Kirsch

et al., 2018). Canadian banks continue to fund fossil fuel development, and make up a quarter of the global ‘dirtiest dozen’ banks in terms of financing for fossil fuel infrastructure between 2016 and 2018 (Kirsch et al., 2018). This power also permeates into Canadian political institutions, as we witness the fossil fuel industry bank role campaigns of pro-oil far-right ‘grassroots groups in Canada, such as Canada Proud, who seek to vilify action on climate breakdown (Lewis & McCarthy, 2019). There is also a network of political figures, and organizers with deep ties to the Conservative Party of Canada, who continue to promote climate denialism, alongside a racist and anti-immigrant far-right political platform (Lewis & McCarthy, 2019). For example, as *the Globe and Mail* reports, that the current “Conservative Party campaign director Hamish Marshall has business links with a national advocacy network supported by oil-industry executives that backed conservative parties in recent provincial elections” (Lewis & McCarthy, 2019).

These concentrations of power, and the ways they are maintained reinforce a politics and discourse that is highly antithetical to the politics of degrowth, and thus serve as a major barrier to the emergence of degrowth. As Jonathan Davies puts it “without confronting and disassembling coercive power from the locality upwards, it is hard to see how alternative political economies can be sustained at any scale” (2014, 3228). This does not mean abandoning the local grassroots efforts and struggles to build a new world today. However, given the totalizing logics of neoliberal capitalism, actions must continually link localities to the wider context that continues to be shaped by powerful external forces (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010). This opens up avenues for further research to build an understanding of how to advance a degrowth politics in this difficult context that takes on the political elite, and that prioritizes a scalar perspective. This considers how adopting alternatives at one scale can have an impact

across scales, to continue to build an understanding of what actions could be prioritized that can disrupt the power and stronghold of the elite over the Canadian economy (Temper et al., 2018)

3. How (if at all) are contemporary Canadian activists seeking to address these barriers?

Interviewees shared with me some of the strengths they saw with the degrowth paradigm.

As Richard Swift said:

I think some of the things the degrowth movement has been very open to is the decentralization of decision making, more direct democracy, a universal income that is not connected to the job market, the notion of the quality of life, rather than just the quantity of it, the critique of affluenza and consumer society. All of those I think are more acceptable within the North American political discourse, than sort of this notion of degrowth. So, I think conceptually degrowth is useful because it unites all of those and makes them more than just individual issues, it makes them part of an alternative. So, I think it is important to keep the notion of degrowth, I'm not really hung up on the word, we can come up with another word, but I think we need a radical paradigm for the environmental movement that includes all of those issues.

All of my interviewees are working in what is a challenging landscape to bring about increased justice and sustainability. Their commitment to this work is important to recognize, and they expressed many ways that they are working to confront the current system and foster new ways of organizing communities. Given the myriad areas of interventions that interviewees engage in, there was also a diversity of pathways, (many of which are highly complementary) shared with me, to address the structural barriers to a transformative degrowth politics emerging in Canada. These pathways include understanding degrowth as a counter hegemonic movement, and prioritizing building a mass movement. This means asking questions such as: how can people be engaged so that they become organizers themselves and part of this counter hegemonic bloc? How do we want the process of organizing to occur to increase the commitment and agency of those involved?

Another related pathway that one activist shared, and the method he is taking to address current barriers, is through popular education to raise class consciousness within movements. Others shared the importance of focusing on narrative and storytelling in their work, to include multiple entry points, and frames to engage with diverse groups of people. This means prioritizing the solutions that resonate and have broad popularity. These represent opportunities to engage more people, bring them in, in order to build a movement. This requires avoiding a politics of purity- that seeks to produce a ‘perfect’ subject in which every *individual* uses the right language and practices a ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ life, while ignoring the larger conditions in which these individuals are living within and which currently constrain the ability for the collective to lead ecologically and socially just lives. As was shared with me by a number of environmental activists, this can end up serving as a barrier for people to get involved. Proposals must always account for the real barriers that constrain the ability of individuals and communities to embrace and actualize degrowth proposals. This reminds us that at its core, the degrowth project must ensure that it is mobilizing a politics and vision that is accessible to those in circles outside of academia, and with those who may not yet have developed a rigorous systemic critique of economic growth and capitalism.

Another way that respondents are seeking to address current barriers is through supporting Indigenous led movements, and Indigenous self-determination in Canada. They expressed the need for environmental movements in Canada to take a decolonial approach. Some respondents are actively working with Indigenous communities to support Indigenous economies, and Indigenous claims to land and title. As Yellowknives Dene First Nation scholar Glen Coulthard highlights, this represents a critical challenge to the status quo that is neoliberal capitalism. He writes:

Revisiting Indigenous political-economic alternatives... could pose a real threat to the accumulation of capital on Indigenous lands in three ways. First, through mentorship and education these economies reconnect Indigenous people to land-based practices and forms of knowledge that emphasize radical sustainability. This form of grounded normativity is antithetical to capitalist accumulation. Second, these economic practices offer a means of subsistence that can over time help break our dependence on the capitalist market by cultivating self-sufficiency through the localized and sustainable production of core foods and life materials that we distribute and consume within our own communities on a regular basis. Third, through the application of Indigenous governance principles to non-traditional economic activities we open up a way of engaging in contemporary economic ventures in an Indigenous way that is better suited to foster sustainable economic decision-making, an equitable distribution of resources within and between Indigenous communities (2013).

While Indigenous movements represent an important force challenging the status quo- of growth-based, fossil capitalism it is critical that a degrowth movement develop a clear decolonial politics, that does not reinforce colonial relations, but at its core is advancing the rights to self-determination of sovereign First Nations.

Lastly, activists shared the importance of taking an action research approach. They shared the critical role that academia can play in engaging in studies, case studies and experiments on policy ideas and solutions that may not yet have broad political support. They expressed the opportunity found in academic research studies that can take longer term focus, or do not have the same financial or structural constraints that organizations and grassroots groups face. One interviewee shared some of the research they were undertaking to experiment and test solutions that may not have political support of the day, but through a low stakes study were able to gain more support and traction for that proposed solution. Indeed, there are many exciting opportunities for ongoing movement-based research.

Research limitations

As this research highlights, there is still a long way to go in our understanding of how to bring about the sorts of wide-scale political transformations that are necessary to prevent the worst of climate breakdown. This thesis is a preliminary analysis to explore this question and has its own limits. A notable limitation is that I had a relatively small interview sample of 14 people. All respondents made invaluable contributions to the research; however, there are other key actors in the Canadian environmental organizing landscape whom I am sure would have important insights to offer. A fundamental limitation in this work is that it does not engage with the activism and degrowth movement that is emerging in Quebec (Abraham, 2019). In Montreal, Quebec there has been an active group- the MQDC: le Mouvement Québécois pour une décroissance conviviale, working to advance the ideas and politics of degrowth. On the orientation of the group, Yves-Marie Abraham (2019) writes:

Apart from a few symbolic protests against the pollution of public space by advertising and the Formula 1 Grand Prix race in Montreal, MQDC members have not initiated new projects on the ground. Instead they have chosen to support existing efforts that resonate with a degrowth perspective. They have, for instance, joined protests against the extraction and transportation of fossil fuels, tax havens, war, and tuition fee hikes. The MQDC also considered it more strategic to create a degrowth group inside Québec solidaire, the most left-wing party represented in Quebec's National Assembly, rather than form a new degrowth party. Admittedly, these decisions were also dictated by the movement's limited membership which, until recently, had never exceeded a few hundred people. Still, it reflects the desire, first and foremost, to create links between diverse struggles (29).

Currently, much of the work to carry degrowth forward in Quebec is being done by a new group- Décroissance conviviale au Québec, who in 2018 put on a degrowth festival, popularizing degrowth ideas in Montreal (Henriquez, 2018). It is clear that there is more momentum for degrowth as a banner and concept to organize around in Quebec than in other provinces in Canada, where it has had little resonance. Not representing this is a limitation of this work. This

limit is reflective of a larger barrier in the Canadian Movement context, as the language barrier between Quebec and the rest of Canada poses challenges to building larger solidarities and movements.

While the interviews cannot be read as a comprehensive view of the environmental movement in Canada, the interviewees nevertheless raised important insights into the challenges that organizations and individuals are facing that speak to the wider context of degrowth. At the time that I was undertaking the research there was a call for a systematic mapping of degrowth planet-wide¹¹- this will be also be invaluable tool that can hopefully provide a more systematic assessment of the degrowth movement in Canada moving forward.

Furthermore, this research explored the political acceptability of degrowth by engaging a specific group of actors- those working specifically on issues related to climate breakdown. As such, this is a group that was highly sympathetic to the ideas of degrowth. A number of my interviewees either shared a very similar critique as degrowth, or were working specifically to advance degrowth. These are critical people to engage on degrowth, however it is important to recognize that had I chosen a different set of stakeholders to interview I may have uncovered a different set of barriers and pathways towards the political acceptability of degrowth. Further research engaging a different set of interviewees- people working in other progressive movements, such as labour movements, social justice movements, feminist movements, etc., politicians at different levels of government, local businesses on their perceptions of degrowth as a viable movement may be highly revealing, and provide the opportunity to uncover different insights for how to address the current marginality of a degrowth politics.

¹¹ The Survey can be found at: <https://www.degrowth.info/en/mapping-degrowth-worldwide/>

Finally, what this research presents is a broad analysis of the barriers and pathways, and as such there is a need for a much deeper dive into all of the themes that emerged from this thesis. And we see this happening with such projects as the Corporate Mapping Project at the University of Victoria that is mapping the power and influence of the fossil fuel industry¹². This shows the concrete networks and players that are influencing the political landscape and institutions in Canada. This can no doubt serve as a helpful tool for movements to better understand who it is that may be thwarting progress, to more clearly expose corporate interests, and to identify where key pressure points in the system may exist to challenge the status quo. This is one example of how more focused research could bring more concrete pathways forward to politicize degrowth ideas, policies and proposals.

Moving forward

This is a highly dynamic field and since undertaking my research interviews there has been a resurgence of new progressive movements around the world that are responding to ecological breakdown and inequality in all its forms, illustrating that multiple better worlds are indeed possible (Escobar, 2017; Roelvink, Martin, & Gibson-Graham, 2015). This includes the launch of Extinction Rebellion in the UK, which has begun a wave of mass non-violent civil disobedience until the UK government adopts its three demands. These demands include enacting legally binding policies to reduce emissions to net zero by 2025, the mass mobilization of government resources, and the creation of a citizen's assembly to oversee the changes to a new system fit for all. We have also seen the emergence of a growing global youth movement, led by a sixteen-year-old Swedish student, Greta Thunberg, who started 'striking' every Friday

¹² The Corporate Mapping Project can be found at <https://www.corporatemapping.ca/>

outside of the Swedish parliament to demand action on climate breakdown. Students across the globe have followed her lead, with the school strike for climate taking off in Canada as well. (Smith, 2018; Hertsgaard, 2019). We have also seen political momentum first in the USA, and now in Canada building around the Green New Deal. This has brought climate breakdown into the political sphere and with far greater ambition than we have seen, expanding the boundaries of what is seen as politically acceptable to debate in government.

These growing mobilizations represent important learning opportunities for the degrowth movement. What is it about these movements that appear to be resonating with people, how are these movements engaging and attempting to scale up their actions, how are they learning and growing and responding to necessary criticism in order to build stronger solidarities? How does degrowth proponents position themselves in relation to emerging movements such as the calls for a Green New Deal taking hold across North America? These are all important questions that can offer pathways forward for degrowth. In part what was raised with me was the need for degrowth to prioritize the needs of all, not just in theory, but in practice. This is to ensure that the degrowth movement does not just build sustainable utopias for a small group of highly educated ‘Degrowthers,’ without producing the wider impacts and social justice aims, core to degrowth (Naegler, 2018). One thing this research reveals is the need to address class interests within degrowth. Degrowth has a very strong critique now developed of economic growth and capitalism, however this on its own is not enough to build a movement. It necessitates engaging with institutions of power, and potentially working with politically popular projects to reform and ultimately over institutions of power. This means prioritizing research that explores the concrete ways specific institutions continue to create the political economic conditions that support fossil fueled growth as its main priority, as well as continuing to build broad based

solidarities to counter them. What is more, degrowth research needs to continue to be responsive not only to the challenges of today- that is climate breakdown, growing inequality and the depoliticizing nature of current climate breakdown debates, but also the political climate more broadly. This includes the narratives, debates and issues that are gaining political support and traction, and continue to work to insert degrowth into these debates and to explore how this can be done in a way that is compelling and that resonates with people outside of academia. This is critical as currently, in 2019 economic growth has slowed, with economists warning of another financial crisis on the horizon (Williams, 2018). This brings significant challenges, as we saw with the 2008 crisis, that was felt most profoundly by those already disenfranchised by the financial system. As growth slows this does, however, present opportunities to expose the cracks of the system. Degrowth scholars can play a critical role in supporting those communities who may be placed in ever more precarious positions, shedding light on the systemic drivers, and the people that produced this context, and offering clear alternatives.

This is necessary since dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement in the wake of neoliberal capitalism has also produced right wing populist movements backed by wealthy donors (Mishra, 2017). There is also a growing trend of right-wing populists being elected to positions of power- in the US, Turkey, India, Brazil, Poland, Italy, and in Canada with the likes of the Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, and increasingly in the Federal Conservative party of Canada (Mishra, 2017; Neiwert, 2017; Lukacs, 2018; Lewis, Clarke, Holder & Kommenda, 2018). The rise of right-wing populism has stoked xenophobia, nationalism, anti-Semitism, fascism, and racism, it has also fueled a backlash against climate action, as climate plans of previous governments have been scrapped and environmental regulations rescinded, in the worst cases with full out climate change denialism (Lockwood, 2018; Phillips, 2018; Watts, 2018; Selby, 2018; Goldstein, &

Greenberg, 2018). These movements have resources, and are working on the ground to actively organize people. For those working on degrowth it is not enough to merely develop a strong critique of the system- of the growth ideology, systems and structures. While this is critical, this has to be paired with action, and signals the need for a more united and strong progressive politics that can not only offer, but also is tangibly working for concrete alternatives grounded in justice and equality.

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Appendix A- Interview Guide

The practical objective of this study is to understand the challenges identified by activists on the ground attempting to operationalize the Degrowth model. How, specifically, do activists communicate degrowth perspectives to a mainstream audience, that is still operating under hegemonic fossil fueled capitalism?

1. What is your background/ what got you started in this work?
2. What are the challenges that your work is trying to address?
3. How is your work positioning itself in terms of the drivers of and solutions to the multiple crises that we face?
4. What is your understanding of the Degrowth movement, and how do you and your work position yourself in relation to it?
5. How do understandings of what might currently be politically acceptable drive or shape your work?
6. Why do you believe there remains inaction within Canadian political spaces to address climate change?
7. Given the current political climate what do you think needs to happen within political spaces to bring about the necessary changes? Where do you see this being embraced?
8. What are the factors that you see today that see to support your efforts to bring about this perspective?
9. Given discourse on echo-chambers and that we are all operating within our own echo-chamber- I am curious how this factors into your work? If you have had any positive examples/ attempts to move beyond echo chamber?
10. Do you have any general advice for researches looking to support your work/ this movement?
11. Do you have anything else to add?
12. Do you know anyone who may be interested in contributing to this project?