

## A Postgrowth Response to Savini's Degrowth Vision

Comment on Federico Savini's "Strategic Planning for Degrowth: what, who, how"

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Planners - both practitioners and scholars - are operating in a world where politicians are in pursuit of economic growth, apparently with public support, and yet the catastrophic evidence of climate crisis and ecological overshoot is increasingly apparent. While many have espoused ecological modernisation, increased resource efficiency and green deals as the way to resolve this contradiction, the difficulties in achieving absolute decoupling of economic activity and resource use are becoming increasingly obvious. Federico Savini is a leading light among a group of scholars exploring degrowth ways of thinking and their relationship to planning. His latest contribution in *Planning Theory* is a significant advance in confronting planning theory and practice with degrowth ideas.

In his paper, he maps out a path for strategic planning and, in particular, radical strategic planning citing the work of Albrechts, Hillier and Balducci. Radical strategic planning is distinguished from mainstream versions, which follow ecological modernisation and operate at a distance from radical voices. Savini seeks to take advantage of the innate ability of strategic planning to engage with a diffuse set of actors and trigger non-linear means of transformation. But, arguing that what "degrowth research currently lacks ... is ... insights into strategies that can publicly legitimise the [degrowth] policies" (p.2), Savini puts particular emphasis on the need to find a new degrowth imaginery to guide strategic planning. He sees the principle of satiation as providing this. With this in place, he then argues that strategic planning can build the public support needed to integrate planned degrowth into the mainstream political agenda through prefiguration, popularization, and pressure.

The model for achieving this change is particularly interesting. If I understand Savini correctly, this involves a virtuous cycle as follows. Activism and social movements promote various degrowth initiatives, mainly associated with commoning, the social economy and civil society. These operate in the interstices of capitalism and prefigure growth by "practicing the future" Planners can help build synergies and linkages between these initiatives and thereby enhance their legitimacy. This can then support political action for use of more formal planning powers to support them. This all feeds positively into further activism for degrowth.

I find the logic of this dynamic compelling and extremely useful in setting out the steps by which change may be achieved. Prefiguration seems to me an important way of demonstrating that alternatives are possible. The degrowth literature has drawn attention to examples such as workers' and housing cooperatives, community land trusts, social enterprises running community assets, community-based energy projects and urban gardens run as commons. Research has shown that these all have potential but require support, say from local planning authorities, as they can be financially vulnerable and dependent on fragile local social capital.

Where I would query Savini's vision is in putting the emphasis on degrowth as a political project, with the emergence of new social movements and active resistance to existing capitalist forms. The key way in which the success of this vision is defined is through changes in social norms, particularly embedding satiation as a core value. For me this raises two questions. Will this be effective in the necessary timescale? And what are the responsibilities of planners in this context?

By emphasising the need to change social norms, to embed degrowth values and to reframe planning problems and solutions, Savini is foregrounding the importance of gaining legitimacy for the degrowth approach, with new social norms leading to new political goals. Planning tools and processes can be part of this by creating a common frame of argument, establishing a vocabulary, and identifying a shared problem, all based on the principle of satiation. But establishing satiation as a core principle is both difficult and contentious.

It suggests a direct conflict with what Savini terms "capitalist values", among which he lists: work, compulsive consumption, individual competition, and profit maximisation (p. 5). Instead, he wants people to be motivated by immaterial pleasure, happiness and satisfaction. The aim is that society's "essential needs" are met. But how will these terms be decided on and by who? For example, who gets to define "essential needs"? There is a strong morality at play here. The idea of reducing material throughput starts with the "less necessary" (p. 1) not only requiring a categorisation of activities into more and less necessary, but morally positioning someone else's desires as trivial. The aim is to have social norms whereby "excess, luxury, profit, overconsumption and accumulation" are seen as "unacceptable" or "immoral". There is something rather Orwellian in this division of the world into 'good' and 'bad'.

There is also a question mark over whether it is correct to attribute these pro-capitalist values to people in the first place. It could be argued that people are not attached to competition and accumulation *per se* but rather to the goods and services they currently see being provided in this way. In this case, the task is not to change social values but rather to demonstrate that there are other ways of providing goods and services.

In my view, there is a problem here in the treatment of economic actors. Savini looks to a partnership between political organisations, civic organisations and grassroots movements but excludes businesses; as indicated above, the motive of profit generation is an unacceptable value. But, if degrowth is a political project set *against* capitalism, then how are goods and services to be generated and delivered? This is a relevant question even if a lower level of output of goods and services is considered desirable. Removing all for-profit organisations creates a real gap in capacity for meeting needs through goods and services. The public sector cannot step in as how would this be funded? And this misrepresents many social enterprises. Research repeatedly shown that most, if not all social economy organisations are hybrid, combining for-profit and not-for-profit elements. Furthermore, not all for-profit firms are necessarily implicated in the drive for growth. Many firms, particularly smaller ones, aim rather for a level that ensures survival and longevity, with sufficient income to pay workers, suppliers and provide a return to the owners, rather than maximising increases in output.

Rather than focussing on the necessarily long-term political project of changing social values, I would suggest addressing more directly the role of economic processes in producing and distributing goods and services. Gibson-Graham's diverse economies framework (2006) is helpful here as it identifies the existing variety of ways that such production and distribution happen, including many ways that do not *necessarily* imply the pursuit of growth. Savini's model of dynamically-generated change could be expanded to include such diverse low or zero growth means of meeting societal needs, with a focus on how they can be practically supported and expand their share of a diverse economy. Legitimacy would arise from their proven ability to meet needs and desires.

This has implications for the role of planners. Savini suggests that they have to be radical planners and engage with radical voices. He sees them as having an important proactive part to play as leaders within and stewards of the process of transformation, building on prefiguration. As Savini puts it, leading a transition is not the same as practicing the future (p. 6). In this way, he sees radical strategic planning is more likely to effect change than insurgent planning from below. My more pragmatic approach would suggest that planners should support already existing diversity in the economy (understood broadly to include the social economy and civil society), rather than positioning themselves as necessarily radical.

But this debate raises questions: to whom are planners responsible? Are they responsible to their professional values? In which case, how do the environmental imperative and a radical call to arms fit with processes of professionalisation? Or are planners responsible to the elected politicians in the local authorities where they work? Can one simply reject electoral democratic politics on the grounds that it is not always prioritising the long-term future of the planet? This could be a dangerous path to go down. Or are planners responsible to their local communities? If so, how is fragmentation and contestation within such communities to be handled? What happens when a local community have priorities that are in tension with degrowth values? The call to be a radical planner could be highly problematic for many within the profession, even if there is much sympathy among planners for action to protect our planet.

So, I would advocate marrying a broadened conceptualisation of Savini's model of change with a focus that builds on problems currently affecting communities in terms of access to goods and services, with particular attention to the wider range of desired goods and services (not just market-induced consumption) and the needs of communities without buying power in that market. the foundational economy can provide a useful guide here (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). This would be more likely to achieve a degree of political salience with both those communities and their political representatives. The aim is to consider how improved access to goods and services could be provided without buying into pro-growth agendas. This would be able to build on existing agendas, initiatives and coalitions. It allies a degrowth perspective with community wealth building (Manley and Whyman, 2021) and the foundational economy, as well as diverse economies. Locally-embedded SMEs would have a key role to play here alongside social enterprises and community organisations.

Such a focus would resolve some of the tensions faced by planners who wish to move beyond a pro-growth agenda but are troubled by buying into a radical, oppositional one.

They would be addressing issues around meeting local needs through modes that are already partially established in a locality. They would not be involved in prefiguring a radical shift in societal values but rather in widening out the ways that goods and services can be delivered by the localised economy, the social economy and civil society without pursuing growth as the dominant value. As such, this is an approach that can better be described as postgrowth. A pragmatic postgrowth approach like this can be acted on more swiftly, whereas embedding a social norm of satiation seems, at best, long-term as a realisable objective. It would fit better with the urgent timescale of our ecological crisis.

But, in saying this, one needs to accept that this is an agenda that has more traction in areas where growth already seems a more distant prospect. Where low levels of demand are affecting local firms and households, this alternative agenda of supporting SMEs, social enterprises and community provision can prove attractive. It would offer an answer to futile attempts to attract inward investment in such areas. A different approach may be needed in areas that are suffering an excess of growth - such as Amsterdam. The danger here is that support for planning moves to restrict development, urban growth and inward migration (including tourists) may pay lip service to the degrowth agenda, just using the latter comes to justify the former. And yet the situation in such areas of hyper-development demands a direct debate on the impacts of increased economic activity in an already over-developed area. Some of this debate is external to the planning system - as in the costs of international travel - but it could also be related to questions of how the regional distribution of economic activity and residential development should be planned.

Neither does this pragmatic postgrowth approach address the types of action on reducing resource material throughput that are needed at a scale above the local, urban or even regional. There is more to reducing material throughput than reducing consumption. In particular, there is a need to address carbon and resource efficiencies that are determined by infrastructure systems: energy, transport, ICT, water, waste management. Such infrastructure sets the context for all urban activity, including postgrowth alternatives. They can also help resolve the question of how to plan urban activity across space to reduce environmental burdens and avoid hyper-development. All of these infrastructures need to transition to carbon-neutral (or carbon negative) modes and maximise their other resource efficiencies. While there are examples of community-based infrastructure that should be encouraged, these are unlikely to produce this transition on their own.

In short, the current crises cannot wait for a society-wide shift in values. Timeliness demands a more pragmatic approach but not one that buys into the false hopes of ecological modernisation. It does require engagement with the current diverse ways in which goods and services are produced and distributed, accepting the validity of the profit motive to SMEs as well as social enterprises. This pragmatic postgrowth approach could then go alongside action at larger scales to tackle the infrastructure systems that support our diverse economies and can help plan lower-impact spatial patterns of urban activity.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006) *Postcapitalist Politics* University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN

Manley, J. and Whyman, P. (eds) (2021) *The Preston Model and Community Wealth Building* Routledge: London

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