

Interview - Giorgos Kallis

Written by E-International Relations

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Giorgos Kallis is ICREA (Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies) Professor at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology, Autonomous University of Barcelona. He holds a PhD in Environmental Policy and Planning from the University of the Aegean in Greece, a Masters in Economics from Universitat Pompeu Fabra, and a Masters in Environmental Engineering and a Bachelors in Chemistry from Imperial College, London. His most recent works include *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care*, *Degrowth*, and *In Defence of Degrowth: Opinions and Manifestos*. Giorgos can be followed on twitter @g_kallis.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

In ecological economics we are turning more and more to political and social questions. There seems to be a consensus emerging in the field that the current system, based on growth as it is, is unsustainable. How do we transition though to a different system, and how could this ever be possible, given the dependence of economies, institutions and people on growth? What is to be done? And how could it ever be done?

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I started as a more 'technical', policy-oriented person (I studied at Imperial College, and my first job was at the scientific support unit of the European Parliament). I believed there were technical solutions to most environmental problems, and if they were not taken up, this must have been because of private interests and the malfunctioning of public administration. I learned political ecology during my PhD (through people like Erik Swyngedouw and Maria Kaika from Oxford whom I had the chance to collaborate with in a research project). Then during my post-doc at Berkeley I had the chance to participate in the graduate seminars of radical political ecologists like Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts. I didn't agree with them about everything, but their way of seeing the world definitely influenced me and made me realise that environmental problems are political problems, in the broader sense of the world political, i.e. problems that have to do with the kind of worlds we imagine, and want to live in — which worlds come to be produced is a matter of power, and capitalism produces particular worlds while denying others.

Much of your work has been focused on developing the idea of 'degrowth' and demonstrating why 'green growth' (based on the decoupling of growth from resource use) is a misguided objective. What are the most persistent misconceptions of degrowth that need to be overcome?

Well, the standard misconceptions are that degrowth is about turning the clock back, returning to the caves, causing a permanent recession and leading people into poverty, etc. There are many people who intentionally spread these misconceptions, because it is easier to fight a strawman, than truly engage with the arguments of the other. As Vaclav Smil recently put it (a scholar who is not politically radical), the idea that we can decouple growth from resource use is basically nonsense. I mean, we can spend years and write tons of research papers (like we did with climate change, the basics of which we have known from Svante Arrhenius since 1895, as noted by Smil) to prove the obvious: there are limits to how efficiently we can use resources, and the more an economy grows the more resources it will use. Compound growth at 2-3% per year is basically exponential growth turning quickly to infinity (have you thought that at 3% growth, the global economy would have to be 11 times larger by the end of the

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century?). You don't need to be a genius to see that this 'bad infinity' will end with a disaster. The degrowth provocation is to say 'stop and think'. Can we do something differently? The hypothesis is that yes, we can. But this is definitely a very optimistic stance. And unfortunately there are many more pessimists around who think that there is no alternative to just continuing the way we have been going, even accelerating, pressing the pedal harder, rather than reaching for the emergency brake.

What are the implications of profound global inequality, and what some may characterise as an imperialist world system, for degrowth? Will degrowth be significantly different in the Global South and Global North?

It is difficult to envision such grand scenarios, and even if we did, they would be irrelevant as global dynamics are not controllable. In any case, degrowth does not mean the reduction of consumption in countries where people do not enjoy a sufficient level of consumption. In these cases degrowth means freedom from externally imposed growth-oriented projects that do not serve, and often destroy the livelihoods of those most in need. The development of some has always been based on the underdevelopment and exploitation of others, sugar-coated under a promise of 'development' of the 'under-developed'.

For countries outside Europe and North America, degrowth relates to autonomy to define and develop their own path that does not pass through the same level of intensive growth-based development that our countries have followed, and which is now not extendable without planetary disaster. For Europe and North America, degrowth means a drastic change in the way we organize production and consumption, and the amount of goods we produce and consume.

If degrowth is the only feasible route to preventing catastrophic climate change, but degrowth is not compatible with capitalism (given that "capitalism is geared to grow or die"), then what are the political implications of this? Should environmentalists be committing their time to seeking revolutionary change, as some ecosocialists may argue, or are there still grounds for pushing for reforms within the current system?

It depends what one means by 'revolutionary change'. If one imagines taking the Winter Palace and implementing an ecosocialist program, it seems to me that this is unrealistic, not only because power is no longer concentrated in a palace (and even if it were, 'palaces' nowadays are much better armed and protected), but also because there is no popular demand for a radical change that has an ecological content. There is much more difficult and arduous work to be done, which is to construct the everyday networks of mutual aid, and the different subjectivities—the people and collectives that would live in and want a different, eco-social system. This is a revolutionary change too, and requires many difficult daily struggles (from biking to work and reducing your consumption of meat, to organizing to vote fascists out of government), that seem like small 'reforms', but are actually very very hard. Yes, this is a slow process and climate change is fast and urgent, but I really cannot see another option other than doing the difficult and slow political and everyday work that needs to be done, in the hope that history is full of surprises and that what seems at times slow can suddenly precipitate and scale up.

Although there are some signs that organised labour is beginning to take environmental concerns seriously, this seems to be coalescing around the concept of a 'green new deal' rather than an agenda of degrowth. Is it feasible that organised workers will become agents of a degrowth movement in the near future?

I hope so. I and others have advocated for a Green New Deal without growth. Established trade unions have many problems, not just their environmental policies. Partly it is the fault of workers who, like us academics, have stayed out of trade union politics, and have allowed unions to reduce themselves to a special interest role, specialised around collective bargaining and protecting jobs at all costs. Trade Unions could and should be much more than that.

Do you think that the increasingly unavoidable prominence of environmental destruction will change mainstream economic approaches?

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Mainstream economics is very hard to change. It is the Church of secular capitalist societies, and the Church does not change its gospel voluntarily and smoothly. You need a reformation and you need a sort of atheism that denies the primacy of the 'religion'. I don't see any good developments within economic departments. They are as closed as ever in who they hire. When you see an ecological, Marxist or Keynesian economist who doesn't use neoclassical models hired in a top University's economic department, *that* will indeed be a change. Until that unlikely change happens, we need to work to develop a different type of economics outside the 'church' of economics. The Post-Crash Economics Society or Rethinking Economics initiatives led by students of economics are a promising trend.

Your most recent book argues for the importance of the concept of limits. What does your work on limits have to say about population growth?

What my work shows is that Malthus's original idea was not that we should limit population, but actually that it is in our nature to want to grow our population without limits, because this is what god wants from us (Malthus was a pastor, remember). Malthus thought that population growth was good—the greatness of a nation was counted by its numbers, he claimed. This idea that our natural inclination is to want more and more is one that economics took from Malthus, the first professional economist. Economists simply changed consumption for population, but the idea was the same, we want to produce and consume as much as possible without limits, this is our natural inclination, and it cannot and should not be limited. You can't ask people 'not to'. You can only grow the economy so that 'they can'.

Against this theology/ideology masked as science we should insist that what is human is our capacity to reason and limits ourselves faced with the consequences of not doing so. Humans have always limited how many children they have. Such limits do not have to follow a regressive or brutal pattern. Women's empowerment and reproductive choice can go a long way to limiting population growth as they already do in many countries. The problem again is not people, but the system, that needs more and more people, so that the cost of labour remains low, and the economy can grow.

Your own academic background traverses the sciences (chemistry) and social sciences (economics). What do you feel the main benefits of this intersection have been, and do you believe there is a need for more interdisciplinary research that cuts across not only the humanities and social sciences, but also the sciences?

We need un-disciplined research. Research that refuses to confine itself to the packaging and labelling of an industrialized research system that wants us specialized, each focusing on a very small piece of the puzzle and forgetting the big picture. We really need old school scholarship, when a scholar was not afraid to intervene in different spheres of knowledge. I had the chance to get a unique professorship here in Barcelona that gives me the freedom to pursue whatever research I like (the ICREA system, which is in some ways similar to the CNRS system in France). My research ranges from philosophical treatises like the book on Limits, to studies of the science fiction of Ursula Le Guin, ethnographies of immigrants working in agriculture in Greece, to counting carbon emissions in IPCC scenarios, or running statistical tests between recessions and emissions. I really love this freedom, and I wish it could be available to all academics.

What advice would you give to young scholars who are starting out in environmental studies?

Be critical of the established wisdom in your field. And always remember the big picture, and why you are doing what you are doing.