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Degrowth and the meaning of freedom

Laura Carlotta Terhorst

Master in International Studies

Supervisor:

Maria de Fátima Ferreiro, Associate Professor,
ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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“If a society cannot deal with resource depletion (which all societies are to some degree designed to do) then the truly interesting questions revolve around the society, not the resource. What structural, political, ideological, or economic factors in a society prevented an appropriate response?”

Joseph Tainter, Anthropologist, (1998, p.50)

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RESUMO

Ao mesmo tempo que a crença no progresso através do crescimento económico domina o mundo, um pequeno grupo de académicos e ativistas apela a mudanças radicais na forma como produzimos e consumimos para combater a crise ecológica. Mas as suas vozes não estão a ser ouvidas. Para aprofundar a compreensão da marginalização das ideias de decrescimento, o objetivo desta dissertação era compreender como as conceções de liberdade podem influenciar as atitudes em relação aos princípios de decrescimento. Através de uma análise teórica dos princípios de decrescimento em relação a três conceções diferentes de liberdade, esta dissertação demonstrou que os princípios de decrescimento não são compatíveis com os conceitos convencionais de liberdade, mas sim alinhados com a conceção alternativa de liberdade como não-domínio, postulada por Pettit (1997) e Skinner (2002). Na parte empírica desta dissertação, esses pressupostos teóricos foram investigados através de entrevistas semiestruturadas com cinco ativistas do decrescimento de Espanha, Portugal e Alemanha. A análise temática destas cinco entrevistas revelou que os cinco ativistas conceptualizam a liberdade para além dos conceitos convencionais. Em vez disso, as suas opiniões sobre a natureza da liberdade parecem alinhar-se com o conceito de liberdade como não-domínio. Embora os resultados da sua investigação qualitativa não possam ser generalizados, implicam que os conceitos convencionais de liberdade poderiam de facto obstruir as nossas sociedades de entrar numa discussão sobre o decrescimento.

Palavras-chave: crise ecológica, crescimento económico, decrescimento, liberdade, não-domínio

ABSTRACT

While the belief in progress through economic growth dominates the world, a small group of academics and activists are calling for radical changes in the way we produce and consume to fight the environmental crisis. But their voices are not being heard. In order to deepen the understanding of the marginalization of degrowth ideas, the aim of this dissertation was to understand how conceptions of freedom can influence people's attitudes towards degrowth principles. Through a theoretical analysis of degrowth principles in regard to three different conceptualizations of freedom, this dissertation demonstrates that degrowth principles are not compatible with conventional concepts of freedom, but rather seem to align with the alternative conception of freedom as non-domination, postulated by Pettit (1997) and Skinner (2002). In the empirical part of this dissertation those theoretical assumptions were investigated through semi-structured interviews with five degrowth activists from Spain, Portugal and Germany. The thematic analysis of these five interviews revealed that the five activists conceptualize freedom beyond conventional concepts. Instead, their views on the nature of freedom seem to align with the concept of freedom as non-domination. Whilst the findings of this qualitative research cannot be generalized, they do implicate that conventional concepts of freedom could indeed prevent our societies from entering in a discussion about degrowth.

Keywords: ecological crisis, economic growth, degrowth, freedom, non-domination

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Glossary of acronyms

EEA	–	European Environment Agency
EU	–	European Union
GDP	–	Gross Domestic Product
GNH	–	Gross National Happiness
GPI	–	Genuine Progress Indicator
IPCC	–	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
OECD	–	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	–	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	–	United Nations

Introduction

The recently published *European environment — state and outlook 2020* report by the European Environment Agency re-emphasized what the protest of millions of students world-wide has highlighted for years: The world is experiencing an environmental crisis, which manifests itself in biodiversity loss, depletion of natural resources and climate change. An acceleration of economic activity and population growth has transformed humanity's relationship with the environment in the last century. Global population has tripled, economic output and use of chemical fertilizers is about 12 times higher and energy demand increased fivefold since 1950 (European Environment Agency, 2019). And this trend is likely to continue. The future scenarios, the report draws, are worrisome for all areas. Hans Bruyninckx, EEA Executive Director, alerts policy makers: "Europe's environment is at a tipping point. We have a narrow window of opportunity in the next decade to scale up measures to protect nature, lessen the impacts of climate change and radically reduce our consumption of natural resources." (European Environment Agency, 2019). The environmental crisis puts humanity's survival at risk. But how do we deal with this threat in western societies? How do we intend to overcome consumption patterns that destroy our planet?

Probably the most prominent answer to this question is given by Bill Gates: In his recent book *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* he advocates for large scale investment in innovation and technological advancements that can foster efficiency, reduce CO₂ emissions and stop resource depletion. But not only Gates is convinced that technology is the key to save our planet, also international institutions, including the UN and the European Commission, intend to take this path, also leading economists from international institutes, such as the IPCC advocate for sustainable consumption and green growth (e.g. IPCC, 2014; IPCC, 2018). But can we simply move forward by shifting to green consumption and clean technologies? Can we really save our planet without giving up on anything? Interestingly, the 'Laudato Si' by Pope Francis from 2015, suggests a fairly different solution. He calls for a radical change in people's lifestyles and asks us to leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress and economic growth. And also in academics, a small body of literature recommends that our societies should take a different turn. The degrowth movement, an emergent social, political, and economic movement insists that western countries need to degrow their economies and radically change social, political and economic activity to enable a sustainable lifestyle for everyone (Jackson, 2011; Kallis, 2011; Demaria et al., 2015). Degrowth scholars and activists praise the end of a growth-based society. However, even though Pope Francis seems to agree with degrowth principles,

their ideas are rarely considered in the political arenas and seem to find little acceptance in the public sphere. Within Europe broad public discussion on degrowth scenarios for the future of the continent does not exist. But why are most Europeans so reluctant to discuss degrowth alternatives?

Research has only recently started to identify and discuss the reasons for marginalization of degrowth within public debates. Until now, it has been suggested that either linguistic objections against the term degrowth itself, lack of support from social forces, mental growth structures or anti-capitalist and anti-liberal values within the degrowth movement, could be possible reasons for its marginalization. However, literature on the marginalization of degrowth misses one seemingly important thought. While not explicitly talking about the degrowth movement, Fragnière (2016) and Pinto (2019), among others, postulate in their work that individual intuition in the general public simply feels that ecological limits are at odds with individual freedom. Predominate conceptions of liberty in western societies understand freedom either as *non-limitation* or as *non-interference*. As this thesis will illustrate, those conceptions of liberty are highly compatible with the contemporary economic system based on capitalism and economic growth. However, degrowth considerations and practices do not align with this concept of freedom at all. Instead, those considerations seem to relate much more with an alternative conception of liberty advocated for by Skinner (2002) and Pettit (1997), who define liberty as *non-domination*. Drawing on these thoughts, this thesis aims to understand which role conceptions of freedom might play in the reluctance of European societies to enter in a discussion about degrowth. Thus, it asks the following question: *How can conceptions of freedom influence attitudes towards degrowth principles?*

In the first chapter the context of this dissertation will be drawn and the following questions will be addressed: *Why does economic growth remain the main policy objective concerning development until today? What is the alternative to growth?* The second chapter will further explore the role of the degrowth movement in European society and answer the question: *What can explain the marginalization of degrowth practices in European societies?* The literature review reveals a gap: It has not been researched yet, in which way degrowth could possibly contradict predominate conceptions of freedom in western, industrialized societies. Thus, the third chapter will focus on conceptions of liberty and function as the analytical framework for this thesis. It addresses the following questions: *Which conceptions of liberty are predominant in European societies? And are those conceptions of liberty compatible with degrowth?* This chapter will reveal that the contemporary paradigm of economic growth is remarkably compatible with understanding liberty as *non-limitation* or as *non-interference*.

Degrowth ideas, however, can rather be associated with the alternative conception of liberty advocated for by Pettit (1997) and Skinner (2002). In order to test, if this theoretical assumption hold, the dissertation then explores how degrowth activists conceptualize liberty. Chapter four, the methodology section, explains how degrowth is practiced, describes the selection of interview partners, introduces the qualitative interview design and points out possible limitations of the findings. In chapter five, the results of the semi-structured interviews will be presented. It will answer the following questions: *How do the interviewees relate to the degrowth movement and how do they conceptualize degrowth?* In the last chapter the findings will then be discussed in regard to the theoretical framework on liberty and answer the question: *How do the interviewees' conceptualization of freedom relate to the three concepts of freedom as non-limitation, freedom as non-interference or freedom as non-domination?* This discussion will eventually also answer the main research question of this thesis.

If this thesis proves that degrowth activists conceptualize liberty not according to predominant conceptions of liberty, this might imply that public debates on an economic transformation towards a degrowth economy can only become possible, if European societies rethink their conception of liberty. And secondly, if their ideas relate to Pettit's and Skinners conception of liberty as non-domination instead, it could create a starting point to rethink our idea of freedom. Therewith it could enable a discussion on degrowth scenarios and a more sustainable lifestyle in European societies in the future.

Chapter 1: Contextualizing the debate: growth vs. degrowth

This first chapter will set the context of the dissertation and depict the academic debate on economic growth. In order to understand the relevance of economic growth for scientific research, political reality and the public debate, first of all the origins of the 'growth paradigm' and its development until today will be introduced and discussed. Although the growth paradigm is the mainstream narrative, it has, however, also faced heavy criticism for many years. In the second part of this chapter the alternative, critical view of the degrowth movement will be sketched.

1.1 The Growth Paradigm

The pursuit of economic growth is widely regarded as the key to human development and progress. This belief is also called the 'growth paradigm'. Daly (1972) introduced this term to describe how the unbreakable belief in economic growth of mainstream economists seemed to

influence the world. But where does this idea stem from? And how did it develop until today? This chapter draws the history of the growth paradigm and illustrates why it still remains the main policy objective around the world until today.

1.1.1 Understanding the origins of the ‘growth paradigm’

If we want to understand the origins of the ‘growth paradigm’, first of all it seems useful to reveal what a paradigm is and how it is constructed. The term ‘paradigm’ was first introduced in the social sciences by Kuhn (1996) in his influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. In his work, Kuhn rejected the view that science evolves gradually towards the truth, which had been universally accepted until then. In his view, something else is profoundly influencing science: “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by members of a given community” (Kuhn, 1996, p.175). According to Kuhn, those collections of beliefs create the only accepted normality and suppress conflicting ideas and beliefs. A paradigm can be understood as a set of beliefs, values and techniques that are shared by a community of scientific experts and dominates research, policy efforts and the public debate. It can, however, also be altered over time. In Kuhn’s view, progress in science evolves through revolutionary processes; a previously valid explanatory set of beliefs is discarded and replaced by another (Kuhn, 1996). For such a transition a theory must appear to be better than those competing with it. Paradigms gain their status because they are more successful than their rivals in solving some of the problems that a group of experts has identified as most pressing. This process is described by his famous term ‘paradigm shift’ (Kuhn, 1996). While Kuhn was concerned with beliefs and development in the natural sciences, his work has been influential to describe a wider phenomenon.

Just as other scientific paradigms, also the belief in economic growth as the key to human development, was constructed over time and only slowly began to dominate the world. In his book *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm*, Schmelzer (2016) describes how the growth paradigm emerged from the 18th century onwards. He asserts that only with industrialization and colonial exploitation, capitalist conditions were institutionalized. This development suddenly “asserted an economic system that was fundamentally dependent on the continuous accumulation of wealth and thus forms of economic expansion” (Schmelzer, 2016, p.76). At the same time, people began to think differently about time. Past, present and future were not seen as fundamentally alike anymore and notions of ‘development’ and ‘progress’ arose, which laid the foundation for classical growth theories. Galbraith (2017) even asserts that Adam Smith already argued in *The Wealth*

of Nations in 1776 that national wealth is not determined by gold and silver reserves, but by the annual labor, meaning by the totality of goods produced and traded. Thus, Smith's work could be understood as an origin of modern growth theories, because he already seemed to consider growth as the normal condition for capitalism. However, at first classical economists did not lay that much focus on economic growth in their writings. Interestingly, Schmelzer (2016) asserts that they even "foresaw a 'stationary state' as the inevitable endpoint of capitalist expansion that would come about due to population growth, diminishing returns, and the limits of natural resources, in particular land" (p.77). While most classical economists, however, feared the stationary state to be harmful to society, the philosopher John Stuart Mill was rather hopeful. He believed that people would reach a sufficient level of wealth in a steady state economy, which would give them time and space to develop their morals and make them happier in general (Buckley, 2011). But Mill's vision of a good life under a steady state economy was a minority view among philosophers and economists at the time. While considerations of growth appeared little in debates on economics during the 19th century, statistical developments and political reactions to the Great Depression opened up an economic discussion on the importance of growth again in the 1920s to the 1940s (Schmelzer, 2016, p. 81). The advance in income statistics made it easier to calculate national income and gave rise to new ways of looking at economics. Schmelzer (2016) even insists that "what today is self-evidently understood as the totality of "the economy"— a conception of a separate system of production and exchange of services, and the public sector, constituted by dynamic and interrelated economic processes within national boundaries – only emerged in the 1930s and 1940s" (p.81). At the same time, the Great depression also had a strong influence in reconsidering growth. After the collapse of the banking system, the idea emerged that political policies need to limit the market. More than ever before, policies were influenced by economic theories and experts. Those experts became increasingly concerned with manipulating macroeconomic outcomes to overcome the crisis. Especially during World War II the focus on economic growth intensified: "It was particularly the statistical measure GNP that fundamentally evolved as a 'war-planning tool' and became a powerful instrument in the estimation of militarization costs and economic planning during the war" (Schmelzer, 2016, p.83). But only after the war, in the 1950's, growth became the main objective of the world's ambitions. The inaugural address on January 20, 1949 by the American president Harry S. Truman is often said to have officially launched the era of economic development. He essentially proclaimed that greater production is the key to prosperity and peace (Truman, 1949). But not only the capitalist world followed the paradigm. Accelerated by the conditions of the Cold War, the growth paradigm gained ground as "the

superiority of capitalism and communism was evaluated in terms of how much consumer goods each system could produce" (Schmelzer, 2016, p.163). Experts on both sides of the iron curtain agreed that economic growth was the major indicator for development and all efforts were directed accordingly. During this time, the economist Simon Kuznets also developed his influential hypothesis on economic growth and income inequality. According to Kuznets (1955), when an economy grows, market forces first increase and then decrease economic inequality. Thus, his work suggests that economic growth will eventually benefit everyone. In the 1950s and 1960s a variety of countries, from Japan to the US, to the Soviet Union, started to set ambitious targets for GDP growth and newly founded international institutions as the World Bank and the OECD began to promote economic growth all over the world (Schmelzer, 2016, pp.164).

As Schmelzer's (2016) historical view on economic growth theories clearly shows, the belief in growth became institutionalized in an era of high international competition. During the Cold War, a measure was needed politically to compare the success of different political ideologies. As a result, a nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) became the single indicator for progress and economic growth the most important policy objective all around the world.

1.1.2 Towards sustainable development and green growth

Nevertheless, as times changed, some academic scholars began to question the paradigm. The first vividly discussed criticism in this regard was articulated by the Clube of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* published in 1972. The report encompasses the results of a comparison between mathematical calculations of population and industrial growth with the available natural resources of the earth. The results were unmistakably clear: "If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years" (Meadows et al., 1972, p. 23). In other words, the report postulated that economic growth cannot be endless, because it is limited by the natural capacity of the planet. But the Clube of Rome report did not stimulate the majority of economists and other scientists to rethink growth, instead they began to discredit the report. Particularly extensive was the response of a research team at Sussex University's Science Policy Research Unit. Cole et al. (1973) criticized the report for its underlining premise of absolute limits of natural resources and repeated their model on the basis of different assumptions. In contrast to the report by the Clube of Rome, their analysis based on the belief that the amount of materials would increase exponentially and pollution would be controlled through technological

innovations. Unsurprisingly, they came to different results. In addition, within the academic discussion about the Club of Rome's report, Solow's (1956) model of economic growth was often referred to. Solow (1956) argued that technological progress is not only the key driver of economic growth, but that technological innovations will help decoupling growth from natural resources possible. In his view, it is possible to remove any part of a natural system and replace it with an artificial one (Solow, 1956). Thus, natural resources can be replaced and their depletion is simply no more seen as a catastrophe for humanity. For his *Contributions to the theory of economic growth*, Solow was even awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1987. Inspired by the belief in technological progress several economists argued that growth can actually be good for the environment (see for example Panayotou, 1993; Grossmann & Krüger, 1994). Their empirical studies suggest that environmental degradation within a country only increases until a certain amount of income per capita after that it decreases again. This phenomenon is also often called the 'environmental Kuznets curve', after Kuznets' work from 1955.

The common belief in technology prevented the limits to growth critique to gain any ground. Thus, by the time the Brundtland Commission famously published their report *Our common Future*, decoupling economic growth from resource use was already perceived possible. While the report agrees with the *Limits to Growth* report on the urgency of the problem of environmental degradation, Brundtland et. al. (1987) suggest that global growth could be part of an international sustainable development path. In the foreword of the report it says: "A new era of economic growth - growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable" (Brundtland et. al, 1987, p. xii). Based on this report, the concept of sustainable development evolved and was recognized by major world leaders in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It also inspired the influential Sustainable Development Goals, a set of goals meeting the challenges of the world created in a UN conference in Rio 2012. Pointing to the importance of economic growth for development, the UN suggests in the description of SDG Nr. 8: "Sustained and inclusive economic growth can drive progress, create decent jobs for all and improve living standards" (Decent Work and Economic Growth, n.d.). Based on the assumption that technological innovation can decouple growth from resource use and energy consumption, other international institutions, such as the OECD and the World Bank proposed the green growth theory as the new universal policy objective. In the World Bank's report *Inclusive Green Growth* from 2012 it says:

We argue that what is needed is green growth—that is, growth that is efficient in its use of natural resources, clean in that it minimizes pollution and environmental impacts, and resilient in that it accounts for natural hazards and the role of environmental management and natural capital in preventing physical disasters. (World Bank, 2012)

Even renowned scientific institutions, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) agree with this view and assume in their reports on climate change that the majority of the necessary reductions in greenhouse gas emissions can be achieved by increasing efficiency (e.g. IPCC, 2014; IPCC, 2018). But *Inclusive Green Growth* did not replace sustainable development. According to the OECD, it rather “provides a practical and flexible approach for achieving concrete, measurable progress across its economic and environmental pillars, while taking full account of the social consequences of greening the growth dynamic of economies.” (What is green growth, n.d.). In other words, it is maintained that sustainable development can be enhanced by inclusive green growth.

As this section has illustrated, the growth paradigm has not been replaced but transformed over time. Although the limits of growth were widely discussed in the 1970s, this did not lead to a paradigm shift. Instead, the Club of Rome’s fundamental assumptions on earthly limits of natural resources were disregarded and the growth paradigm was simply adjusted to the critique. Today, sustainable development through inclusive green growth prevails as the new universal policy objective.

1.2 Alongside the mainstream - The Degrowth Movement

But besides this mainstream narrative more fundamental critiques on growth have been articulated ever since the 1970s. While the controversial *Limits of growth* report was arguably the most influential work at the time, other scholars have criticized growth on similar terms (e.g. Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Schuhmacher, 1972; Gorz, 1972; Daly, 1972). Based on these early objections against growth and a criticism of the concept of development, which emerged around the turn of the millennium (e.g. Latouche, 2009) the degrowth movement emerged. While degrowth is a diverse concept, it essentially can be summarized as a critique on the growth paradigm, advocating for a prioritization of social and ecological well-being instead of GDP growth. This section will present the movement’s origins in more detail, further specifying its critique on the prevailing growth paradigm and introduce the degrowth alternative.

1.2.1 Origins of the degrowth movement

A few months before the *Limits of growth* report was printed, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen had published his work *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*. His critique on economic

growth, was based on similar assumptions, but centered on the unsustainability of human production processes. According Georgescu-Roegen (1971), humans turn 'low entropy', namely valuable natural resources, into 'high entropy', namely worthless waste, during production. He holds that this is true despite a certain possibility to recycle waste, because only part of it can be recycled through long energy- and material-intensive processes, and the bio-geo-chemical natural recycling processes take far too long for human purposes. And because there is no influx of natural resources in the world, the stock of 'low-entropy' is limited and simply used up over time (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971). Similar critique was also expressed by Ernest F. Schumacher in his influential book *Small is beautiful*. Schumacher (1972) added that the capitalist scaling of production led to humanity's unsustainable handling of the environment. He asserted that the scale of modern production processes is damaging human societies as well as the environment immensely: "even bigger machines, entailing ever bigger concentrations of economic power and exerting even greater violence against the environment, do not represent progress: they are the denial of wisdom" (Schumacher, 1972, p.29). Instead, he called for a return to small scale technology and re-localization of production. Together with the writings of Daly (1972) on a steady state economy, the *Limits of Growth* report (1972), Schumacher's (1972) and Georgescu-Roegen's (1971) early critiques of growth are often considered the basis of the degrowth theory (Martínez-Alier, 2010). However, the word 'degrowth' was not mentioned in any of those writings. It first appeared during a public debate in the aftermath of the Club of Rome report, where the social philosopher André Gorz posed the question: "Is global balance, which is conditional upon non-growth—or even degrowth—of material production, compatible with the survival of the (capitalist) system?" (Gorz, 1972: iv). After its introduction, the term '*Décroissance*' (fr. degrowth) appeared several times in the academic debate in France (e.g. Grinevald & Rens, 1979; Gorz, 1980).

In the early 2000s a second wave of interest for degrowth emerged. While in the first phase the degrowth debate centered on resource limits, the second phase is characterized by its criticism of the concept of sustainable development (D'Alisa et. al, 2014). Important contributions to this line of thought came from Serge Latouche (2009) who postulated, amongst others, that sustainable development is an oxymoron. His work based on the writing of post-development scholars such as Wolfgang Sachs, Arturo Escobar, Gilbert Rist, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Majid Rahnema, Ashish Nandy, Shiv Visvanathan, Gustavo Esteva, who essentially criticized the uniformization of cultures around the world, resulting from consumption and production pattern as well as technological changes in industrialized, western countries (Sachs, 1992). The specific problem that Latouche (2009) points out, is that the western development

model is widely promoted as a mental construct for the rest of the world even though it might not fit to other realities and cultures. Instead, countries should follow their own path towards progress. Out of these critiques, the ‘culturalist’ pillar of the degrowth movement emerged.

Degrowth, as an international research area was only established after the first Degrowth conference in Paris in 2008. Since then, the degrowth discourse includes diverse multi-disciplinary research at the intersection of social and environmental sciences. According to Demaria et. al. (2013), contributions to the degrowth literature draw on concerns about ecology, critiques of development and advocate for anti-utilitarianism, meaning of life and well-being, bio-economics, democracy and justice. Some scholars do not explicitly call for a degrowth scenario and rather call for a world ‘beyond’ or “post” growth (e.g. Jackson, 2017; Göbel, 2020; Peach, 2012), but their work is commonly included in the degrowth literature. In addition, degrowth is not only an academic movement but merged into the social realm and manifested itself as a social movement as well. During the 2000s, degrowth also became an activist slogan. It started in protests dedicated to car-free cities, food cooperatives, anti-advertising and free meals in Lyon 2001 and spread over the rest of France, Italy and Spain in the following years (Demaria, 2013). Today an international network of activist groups, the degrowth network, exists in Europe and beyond. But what does degrowth mean exactly?

1.2.2 Degrowth critiques on the growth paradigm

First and foremost degrowth is a critique of growth. Degrowth proponents call for “the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic growth as a social objective” (D’Maria, 2014, p. 3). Thus, the movement’s critique on the growth paradigm is essentially twofold. On the one hand, degrowth proponents argue that decoupling material throughput from economic output is unlikely, and on the other hand also question if growth leads to a better quality of life at all.

While ecological economists such as Ayres (1996), Martinez Alier (2016) or Kallis et al. (2018) agree that, while in theory it seems possible to decouple resource use from growth by enhanced resource efficiency and substitution through technological progress, they argue that in practice absolute decoupling is unlikely. According to Martinez Alier (2016), classical economic thinking is based on wrong assumptions as “it mistakes the depletion of resources and the increase of entropy for wealth creation” (p.1100). These wrong assumptions lead to a utopian imagination of the future of economic growth. According to Kallis et. al (2018), mainstream economists simply disregard the limits of technological progress: “Growth can become “cleaner” or “greener” by substituting, for example, fossil fuels with solar power, or

scarce, environmentally intensive metals with more abundant and less intensive metals. But new substitutes have resource requirements, and life-cycle impacts that cross space and time” (p.296). In other words, he considers the expectations of mainstream economists towards technical innovation a mere utopia. In addition, ecological economists often refer to rebound effects. Ayres (1996), for example, argues that the problem lays within the logic of growth itself: “What happens is that increased demand for goods drives production to larger scale. Economies of scale (in manufacturing) then result in lower unit costs. In a competitive market, lower costs will be translated into lower prices. Lower prices, in turn, generate increased demand” (p.119). This mechanism was already observed by William Stanley Jevons in the 19th century. In his work *The Coal Question* from 1865 he describes a paradox: Efficiency gains in the usage of coal did not, as people hoped at the time, simultaneously lead to a reduction in coal usage. Instead, the technological progress led to more demand and thus, was followed by an increase of coal consumption. Rebound effects are various and can be observed in material and energy production and consumption alike. In her recent book *Unsere Welt neu denken: eine Einladung* Göbel (2020) gives an illustrative example for the rebound effect in the automobile industry: In the fifties, a normal VW Beetle used around 7,5 liter fuel for 100 kilometer. In the nineties, VW produced the same model again. Even though there had been great technological progress and efficiency gains, it consumed almost as much as its predecessor did in the fifties. The gains in efficiency were invested in engine power: Now the Beetle had 90 instead of 30 PS and was able to drive much faster (Göbel, 2020, p.104). In this case, energy savings through efficiency gains did clearly not reduce energy consumption. But rebound effects can appear in various other ways, too.¹ Thus, instead of stopping climate change and the environmental collapse, resource efficiency could even lead to the acceleration of the crisis.

Empirical evidence seems to support the degrowth critique. It has been revealed that developing countries are sometimes even performing better on environmental issues than some wealthy countries (e.g. Stern, 2004). Thus, environmental Kuznets curves are not applicable in all cases. In addition, most recent empirical evidence suggests that the green growth theory lacks empirical support. Hickel and Kallis (2020) analyzed several studies on the development of world-wide resource use and Co2 emissions in relation to the global GDP growth in recent years and also similar studies on future projections and could not find empirical evidence that absolute decoupling is possible on a global scale. They summarize that several studies showed, that GDP and material use have increased approximately 1:1 at the global level in recent years. Even high-income countries under optimistic conditions will only be able to decouple GDP

¹ For more information on rebound effects check Santarius (2012)

growth from resource use for a limited amount of time, because of limits to efficiency improvements (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). While carbon emissions have increased somewhat slower than the GDP and it seems indeed possible to decouple growth from Co2 emissions, technically it will be impossible to achieve this fast enough to comply with the Climate goals of the Paris Agreement (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Thus, rising income per capita does not automatically lead to less environmental damage on a global scale. In summary, it can be said that degrowth proponents in the fields of environmental sciences and ecological economics argue that putting the 'green growth' objective as top priority for policy incentives, might lead to the development of highly efficient technology, but is clearly not enough to prevent the collapse of the planet's ecosystem. No matter how effective technology becomes in managing resources, further increases in world-wide production and consumption will eventually still lead to an environmental disaster.

But the principle of growth is not only subject to discussion on ecological terms. Degrowth proponents also disagree with the common belief that an increasing GDP is the main indicator for social progress and quality of life. First of all, Kuznets hypothesis on the reduction on inequality is often clearly refuted by recent studies. Göbel (2020), for example, refers to the study of the *World Inequality Lab* from 2018, in which a team of more than 100 researchers from around the globe showed that inequality grew on a global scale ever since 1980. It revealed that the richest 1 percent accumulated one fourth of the all capital gain in this time frame (Göbel, 2020, p.167). Göbel (2020) asserts that of all wealth created by economic growth since globalization processes started, many poor people have received some, very few rich people have received an incredible amount, and the large middle class has received little or nothing. In addition, Jackson (2017), for example, holds in his book *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a finite planet* that the significance of the GDP for societal progress is often overestimated. He presents statistical studies which demonstrate the inability of the GDP to signal societal progress (Jackson, 2017, pp.100). He refers to a study by Kubiszewski et al. from 2013, who generated a statistic comparison in seventeen different countries from 1945 to 2005 between numbers of the GDP per capita and number of the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI). The GPI is an alternative progress indicator which, next to the GDP, takes into account various societal and environmental measures. The results were astonishing. While the GDP had risen continuously since 1945 in all countries, the growth in GPI stagnated already in the 1970s and even declined from the 1980s onwards (Jackson, 2017 p. 101). Also in terms of individual life satisfaction the GDP was put in question. While growth proponents insist that higher income also signals happiness, degrowth proponents are likely to point to a study by American

economist Richard Easterlin from the mid-80s on the relationship between life satisfaction and income (e.g. Scheider et. al, 2010; Sekulova, 2014). In his work, Easterlin compared data from 19 different countries during the timeframe of 25 years. His findings suggest that above a certain income per capita, people's average satisfaction no longer increases (Easterlin, 1974). This contradiction to the common belief that more income leads to a better quality of life, is still called the 'Easterlin-paradox'. A more recent data analysis, based on Easterlin's (1974) study also delivers similar results. Although the comparison between GDP and life satisfaction in the World Values Survey conducted by Inglehart et al. in 2008, demonstrate that rich countries have a significantly higher rate of life satisfaction, the study also reveals that absolute gains in life satisfaction diminish above a certain GDP level (Jackson, 2017, p.105). In addition, degrowth critique on the GDP is also often linked to feminist critique of growth (e.g. Dengler & Strunk, 2017). Feminist literature has shown how focus on GDP growth keeps the boundary between visible wage labor and invisible unpaid labor intact. Solely looking at the GDP per capita increase only captures what is countable. Thus, paid work is valued but unpaid work, such as care giving and raising children, is ignored. Since women do most of the unpaid work, it is argued that the growth paradigm prevents a social transition to more gender equality (Dengler & Strunk, 2018).

Contemporary discussions in degrowth literature reveal that there has been heavy criticism on the 'growth paradigm' in terms of sustainability and well-being. Proponents of degrowth claim that the omnipresent focus on increasing GDP per capita neglects the devastating environmental effects of economic growth and confuses the rise of income with better quality of life and well-being. International institutions, such as the United Nations have tried to tackle those critiques. Especially criticism on the GDP as main development indicator has been acknowledged in those circles. Since 1990, the UN, for example, uses the Human Development Index (HDI), which is calculated as the average of three different indicators: life expectancy index, education index, and income. However, economic growth measured by national income continues as the main indicator for a countries' well-being in the political arena and within public discourse. Denouncing this hegemonic belief, degrowth calls for a paradigm shift. But what is the alternative to growth?

1.2.2 The degrowth alternative(s)

As the history of the term, and the lines of thought of the movement already indicate, degrowth has complex meanings. It identifies not only a research area but also a social movement and a

societal process. The central idea of the degrowth movement is summarized on the homepage of the *Research and Degrowth* research center:

Sustainable degrowth is a downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet. It calls for a future where societies live within their ecological means, with open, localized economies and resources more equally distributed through new forms of democratic institutions. Such societies will no longer have to “grow or die.” Material accumulation will no longer hold a prime position in the population’s cultural imaginary. The primacy of efficiency will be substituted by a focus on sufficiency, and innovation will no longer focus on technology for technology’s sake but will concentrate on new social and technical arrangements that will enable us to live convivially and frugally. Degrowth does not only challenge the centrality of GDP as an overarching policy objective but proposes a framework for transformation to a lower and sustainable level of production and consumption, a shrinking of the economic system to leave more space for human cooperation and ecosystems. (Definition, n.d.)

Thus, degrowth is a questions growth, the GDP as an indicator for progress and commodification. But beyond this criticism, degrowth also stands for an alternative, desired direction industrialized societies should take. Instead of focusing on principles of capitalist commodification, profit and growth, this alternative vision for the future of humanity is based on principles of ‘sharing’, ‘simplicity’, ‘conviviality’, ‘care’ and the ‘commons’ (D’Alisa et al., 2014, p. 3). Degrowth calls for societies that use fewer natural resources and organize life radically different. Thus, a degrowth society would not only have lower consumption and production levels but also different societal and political structures. D’Alisa et al. (2014) metaphorically explain that the degrowth objective is “not to make an elephant leaner, but to turn an elephant into a snail” (p. 4). Thus, degrowth cannot be understood as the simple wish for negative GDP growth, it’s a call for a different society. While degrowth proponents come from various disciplines and might not always agree with each other on every aspect of their writings, there do exist, as D’Alisa et al. (2014) point out, ‘centers of gravity’ in the writings about degrowth alternatives. And indeed, assessing the exiting literature on degrowth it becomes evident that most authors essentially advocate for re-localization and communalization in both the economic system and the organizational structure of society.

First of all, degrowth visions often propose alternative indicators to the GDP, linked to already existing projects, such as the South American concept ‘buen vivir’ or the economies of happiness in Bhutan (Kallis, et al., 2018). Verma (2017), for example, argues that Bhutan’s approach to national development, namely the reliance on their indicator Gross National Happiness (GNH) can indeed function as a holistic alternative to the GDP for the degrowth movement. Economic activities in degrowth scenarios are linked to the idea of local production but also involve the idea that natural goods should be placed under community control through,

for example, local cooperatives, to assure dematerialization of production and consumption (Mocca, 2020; D’Alisa et al., 2014). Here the idea of *commons* is vital in order to understand production in a degrowth scenario. According to Helfrich and Bollier (2014) *commons* can be understood as “a paradigm of governance and resource-management, and as a set of social practices in virtually all fields of human endeavor” (p.75). Commons can be natural resources as well as digital platforms or knowledge. These *commons* are by principle held by the community or a network and managed together. In many degrowth scenarios co-operatives, whose organization often resembles the idea of *commons*, are considered to play a crucial role in the production processes of a degrowth society (e.g. Jackson, 2017). Financial activity is proposed as well to be re-localized and communalized to assure financial autonomy of communities and more financial equality. Proposals vary from zero interest rates, cap and share programs for emissions, local currencies, to time banks and local exchange trading (D’Alisa, et al. 2014; Mocca, 2020; Kallis et al. 2012). In addition, work as such is given significantly more attention and value in the degrowth literature. The importance of unpaid and voluntary work receive special attention in feminist visions of degrowth (D’Alisa et. al. 2014; Dengler & Strunk, 2018). Especially care work is important for a degrowth scenario, argue D’Alisa et al. (2014), as “it responds first to the idea of equity among genders by sharing care work within the sphere of the community as well as within society as a whole” and “re-instates the importance caring has on the well-being of the self, the family, the neighborhood and the society as whole” (p.65). In addition, Jackson (2017) also holds that a sustainable economy could be built upon labor intensive services such as libraries, sport clubs and creative centers instead of consumption centered enterprises. To finance such a shift in the economy and labor market, degrowth proponents propose a job guarantee through work sharing and basic or minimum and maximum incomes (D’Alisa et al., 2014). In addition, degrowth proponents also argue for the communalization of organizational structures of society on a local level. They criticize the bureaucracy of the modern state because it supposedly leads to non-egalitarian and undemocratic hierarchies in society. Instead, they advocate for non-hierarchical forms of decision-making and participatory democracy (D’Alisa et al., 2015). For degrowth theorists the perfect scale for such forms of production and organization are small communities. Ideas on how such communities could look like range from urban villages to bioregions and eco-communities (Mocca, 2020).

As this section has demonstrated, the degrowth alternative is not to be confused with the prospect of an economic recession. While proponents of degrowth clearly advocate for downscaling of production and consumption, they emphasize even more the necessity to shift

policy efforts away from an arbitrary indicator, the GDP, to actual human well-being. Alternative visions on how a degrowth society could look like are diverse but tend to base on similar values. The idea is to shift towards a local and community-based way of living, share materials instead of owning them and most importantly restrict economic activity instead of expanding it.

Chapter 2: Degrowth at the margins

Today, as the world is facing a tremendous environmental crisis, there are more than enough reasons to consider degrowth at least as a possible scenario for economic and social transformation towards a more sustainable way of living. However, while degrowth as an academic research area has been growing in recent years, it rarely reaches political realities nor the public consciousness in Europe. Illustrative for the marginalization of degrowth ideas within wider public debates, is a study conducted by Capasso (2021), in which he reviewed the Norwegian public discourse on ‘degrowth’ and ‘green growth’. In his study he only found 23 articles mentioning 'degrowth' whereas he collected 366 articles on ‘green growth’ (Capasso, 2021, p.3). This marginalization has only recently been acknowledged and addressed within academic literature (e.g. Strunz & Bartkowski, 2017; Buch-Hansen, 2018, Koch 2020). In this chapter I will summarize the existing explanations for the marginalization of degrowth. While most authors search for theoretical reasons why degrowth does not enter the societal discourse in Europe, empirical work on the issue is basically non-existent.

2.1 Linguistic objections against ‘degrowth’

First of all it is argued that one reason for the marginalization of the movement might be the term ‘degrowth’ itself. Drews & Antal (2016) claim that “degrowth may be an unfortunate name for a proposed alternative to the economic growth paradigm” (p.183). Their argumentation is threefold. First of all, cognitive science reveals that the term ‘degrowth’ itself triggers negative feelings and thoughts. Linguistically, the English word "growth" has many positive connotations, for example "offspring grow if they are healthy, plants grow if they are alive" (Drews & Antal, 2016, p.183). In addition, it is already engrained in our linguistic habits to talk about personal development as ‘personal growth’ or ‘inner growth’ (Drews & Antal, 2016, p.183). Thus, they argue that attacking ‘growth’ is "an uphill battle according to cognitive science" (Drews & Antal, 2016, p.183). Secondly, degrowth is, according to the authors, often misinterpreted simply as economic recession. If people are not familiar with the ideas behind

degrowth, which most of the people are simply not, they are likely to understand degrowth as a mere reduction of the GDP (Drews & Antal, 2016, p.184). Recent experience of GDP reductions in many countries was followed by a massive wave of job losses, cuts in public spending and lowering of salaries (e.g. in the aftermath of the financial crisis). Thus, spontaneous reactions to degrowth are likely to be negative (Drews & Antal, 2016, p.184). And lastly, degrowth might also paradoxically reinforce the growth paradigm due to what is called the 'backfire effect'. It signifies that the correction of misinformation by simple denial can also increase its validity. For example, president Nixon's statement "I am not a crook" reinforced his reputation as a crook among the general public (Drews & Antal, 2016, p.184). Drews and Antal (2016) argue that the same could apply to the degrowth movement, since in their slogan 'growth' is simply denied. Instead they suggest alternative terms such as 'good life' or 'stable prosperity' (Drews & Antal, 2016, p.186). While this criticism on degrowth does not relate much to its actual content, it seems valid to take into account the external impact of linguistic decisions. However, this approach does not deliver an explanation for the marginalization of the German movement of 'Postwachstumsökonomie'² or other writings which do not explicitly use the term 'degrowth' (e.g. Jackson, 2017; Göbel, 2020, but are nevertheless also ignored by politics and public).

2.3 Degrowth lacks support from a cohesive collection of social forces

Another reason could be that the degrowth movement does not have strong connections to any influential social forces, which could promote degrowth ideas and enhance public discussion. Drawing on critical political economy theory, Buch-Hansen (2018) claims that political ideas do only become hegemonic if "a constellation of social forces with sufficient power and resources to implement it [...] find it appealing and struggle for it" (p. 160). However, there is very little support for degrowth from social forces such as political parties, labor unions, business associations or international organizations. But why is that so? First of all, Buch-Hansen (2018) asserts that the growth paradigm adapted extremely well to its critics. The new green growth objective is convincing for almost all social forces, including those concerned with sustainability, and this leaves basically no room for other political ideas. Thus, even those actors who could in theory support a degrowth scenario e.g. companies for renewables, are following the green growth paradigm instead (Buch-Hansen, 2018, p.161). Groups that actually do support degrowth, are social enterprises and grassroots organizations which only exist on the edge of society and have little influence on wider public debates (Buch-Hansen, 2018, p.161).

² Post-growth economy.

Another important point in this regard is developed by Brand und Krams (2018). According to them, it is difficult for the degrowth movement to enhance a cooperation with unions or other interest groups coming from the working classes because the call for degrowth fuels fears among people threatened with job loss instead of opening up options for action and cooperation. Brand and Krams (2018) hold that the unease, large parts of the population feel about degrowth, stems from the suggested discourse of cosmopolitan middle-class on ‘liberation from abundance’ - which plays a central role in parts of the degrowth literature. This discourse, however, does not address real poverty, marginalization, fears and humiliations which many people face even in industrialized, rich societies (Brand & Krams, 2018, p.22). In other words, a person living in relative poverty within the EU is likely to regard degrowth as a project of the privileged. According to those concerns, the degrowth movement does not (yet) have the instruments to reach public discussions and force policy makers to listen to their ideas. This critique on the degrowth movement might certainly be a major factor for its marginalization, but empirical research would be needed to show the validity of these claims.

2.2 Degrowth against mental ‘growth’ structures

Reasons for the marginalization of degrowth can, however, also be spotted within the movement’s actual content. Multiple scholars have argued that degrowth scenarios are obviously problematic to accept for most people because they clearly contradict the economic growth paradigm. The idea of ever-lasting growth is not only hegemonic in the institutional and political realm, but it is, as Welzer (2011) claims, ingrained in the mental structures of industrialized western societies. According to Welzer (2011), ideas about freedom, mobility or happiness are shaped just as much by historically specific economic and social formations as, for example, life course concepts and biographical patterns. Referring to neurobiological studies, Welzer (2011) claims that the human brain incorporates environmental experiences into the neuronal circuitry. Thus, economic growth might be regulated through institutional infrastructures and manifested in material structures, but the mental structures even translate it to the everyday practice of individuals (Welzer, 2011, p.14). Drawing on Welzer’s thought, Büchs and Koch (2019) show that degrowth scenarios have been heavily discussed as to their prospects of populations well-being. People most likely fear, that a decrease in material output will, no matter which measures accompany it, lead to decreases of subjective well-being, because ones “identities and life goals are closely aligned with the idea of growth – shaped by ideas of social progress, personal status and success through careers, rising income and consumption” (Büchs & Koch, 2019, p.160). Thus, they conclude that the strong concerns about

possible negative well-being implications of degrowth scenarios within current generations could constitute a reason for a lack of public support (Büchs & Koch, 2019). Similarly, Koch (2020), drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, holds that degrowth might not appeal to people because it is not sufficiently linked to their expectations of the future, which in turn are recollections of their past experiences. Bourdieu's concept of habitus implies that certain symbolic structures exist in people's lives which lead them to reproduce the social conditions of their own upbringing (Koch, 2020, p.6). According to Koch (2020), Bourdieu's analysis is helpful to understand the cultural hegemony of the growth imperative. He argues, that the growth paradigm even "comes close to that of the Catholic doxa of the Middle Ages, serving as a kind of *pensée unique*, since it appears to provide quasi-natural solutions for all kinds of social and ecological issues" (Koch, 2020, p.7). Thus, disengaging with the growth imperative seems unimaginable and undesirable for individuals living in modern industrialized societies.

2.3. Anti-capitalist values within the degrowth movement

But not only the hegemonic belief in growth as such seems to constitute a hindrance for the degrowth movement, it has also been argued that degrowth is essentially anti-capitalist (Fotopoulos, 2007; Boonstra & Joosse, 2013; Buch-Hansen, 2018; Feola, 2019). And the persistence of capitalism is taken for granted in modern societies. The philosopher Fredric Jameson (2003) even claims that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (p.76). But in what sense is the degrowth alternative anti-capitalistic? Could a non-growing economy not just as well be compatible with capitalism?

Regarding the latter question, Smith (2010) holds that capitalism is impossible without growth, because the fundamental idea behind capitalism is "grow or die". First of all, capitalist division of labor is bound to create more productive output and thus, the producers will be interested in finding new markets for their products. Secondly, capitalist market competition forces producers to grow and expand their production to benefit from economies of scale and invest in technological innovation. And lastly, big capitalist corporations are owned by shareholders who strive for the company's growth to maximize profits. Lawn (2011), however, rejects Smith's view on the relationship between capitalism and growth. Instead, he insists that a stable state economy can exist within a capitalist system. According to Lawn (2011), the real law of a capitalist marketplace is not 'grow or die' but rather 'profit or die' (p. 9). He holds that there exist limits to economics of scale in terms of profit making because of diminishing returns on scale. Investors are interested in making profit, rather than in growth. He claims that there

exist exactly three way of making profit: increased output, higher prices through improved quality and more efficient production (Lawn, 2011). According to Lawn (2011) only the first way of making profit actually involves growth. And “even then, the expansion of output by any one firm need not constitute growth at the macro level if, as pointed out, the rise in output merely displaces the output of another firm in the same industry or the output of another industry” (Lawn, 2011, p.10).

Buch-Hansen (2018) acknowledges Lawn’s theoretical view on growth and capitalism, but holds that his view is, however, rarely given credit within the debate about growth and capitalism. Instead, he claims that “it is certainly safe to say that there is little in the history of capitalism so far that would indicate the ability of this system to function without growth” (Buch-Hansen, 2018, p. 160). And even if a non-growing capitalism could be established this would not mean that degrowth is compatible with capitalism. According to Buch-Hansen (2018), the degrowth vision of socially equitable societies contradicts capitalism, because capitalism is essential exploitative and creates inequality. Similarly, Fotopoulos (2007) argues that degrowth might not exactly position itself against market economy and rather seems to aim at a reduction of the same system, but it definitely enhances a change of values and ideas in people's minds. Economic growth is an integral part of this economic system and changing people’s ideas will eventually also evoke a system change (Fotopoulos, 2007). Thus, he is convinced that degrowth would essentially call for a radically different world without market economy. Feola as well (2019) holds that degrowth is necessarily a call for the unmaking of the capitalist system. The incompatibility of degrowth with capitalism becomes especially illustrative in Latouche's writing on the decolonization of the imaginary, which Feola understands as “a liberation from the social obligation to ever increasing consumption, the de-skilling caused by the ever increasing dependency on technology and the market, the illusion of freedom in a highly constrained market economy, and from a technical-productive system that is perceived as inevitable and optimal in the dominant paradigm” (Feola, 2019, p. 981). Therefore Feola evaluates degrowth, at least in Latouche’s understanding, as a heavy criticism of capitalism. To demonstrate his assertion, he cites Boonstra and Joosse (2013) who agree with his view and argue that “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 logic of capitalism, since economic growth is the single mechanism that holds the capitalist economic system together” (Boonstra & Joosse, 2013, p.172). Quite recently, also engaged degrowth proponents have acknowledged that degrowth might not be compatible with capitalism. Kallis et al. (2018) assert that "Recession and depression are possible within

capitalism; degrowth is probably not. Whereas in theory, growth may not be necessary or inevitable within capitalism, in practice, the system generates growth via dynamics of competition, private ownership, and the availability of cheap energy supply” (p. 300). Thus, in a world in which it is easier to imagine the end of the world, then to imagine the end of capitalism, it seems evident that important hindrances for the degrowth movement emerge from its anti-capitalist values.

2.4 Degrowth is not a liberal agenda

Despite anti-capitalist tendencies and values within the movement, it is also argued that degrowth is a critique on liberalism. Quilley (2013), for instance, asserts that many celebrated cultural values and institutions, such as democracy, pluralism, individualism or gender equality, emerged within the capitalist system and are interwoven with the idea of permanent economic expansion. He explicitly claims that “permanent economic growth has been a prerequisite for the emerge of liberal (...) societies based on the lattice of interdependent und unrelated individuals and social groups who may not even be directly aware of each other” (Quilley, 2013, p.263). Especially the idea of individual freedom and fulfillment were only made possible by modern capitalist expansion, because it disentangled people from their traditional ties of regions and kinships. Only under such circumstances people were able to relate to their individual identities more than to community identities (Quilley, 2013). Thus, the complex entanglement between capitalist expansion and liberalism seems to pose an essential problem for the degrowth movement:

The individuated personality which finds expression in democratic politics, in liberal contract theory, in the neoclassical myth of the Homo economicus and in moral philosophy is not universal. S/he is the product of capitalist modernization and the division of labor. This is a paradox with major implications for anyone who dreams of going small and local. Any contraction of the division of labour in favour of a smaller scale, re-localised, less urbanised form of society, would have consequences for the personality structure. With the loss of complexity, the steady-state society would also lose the over-bearing, self-sufficient, highly creative, and often mentally fragile sense of self that defines the modern Ego. (Quilley, 2013, pp.273-4)

The specific problem Quilley (2013) points to, is that a transition to a degrowth society bears the risk of losing progressive, liberal attitudes and values. By comparing the degrowth literature with radical critiques on liberalism and modernity, Strunz & Bartkowski (2017) come to similar conclusions. They reason that there are various currents within the degrowth literature, some express more moderate critique on liberalism and are promoting reforms, but others are taking a more extreme stand and reject existing institutions of liberal democracies (Strunz & Bartkowski, 2017). Currents within the degrowth literature long for humans to return to their

natural place in the world and criticize scientific rationalism and technology. According to Strunz & Bartkowski (2017), those radical critiques question the legitimacy of current liberal institutions and call for freeing people from their oppression. While most of those radical critiques, however, explicitly align with the core values of an open society, such critiques contain “a crucial risk here: the value foundation of the open society cannot be taken for granted – doing so might rather endanger these values” (Strunz & Bartkowski, 2017, p. 10). Thus, the problem is that such critique on liberalism opens space for undemocratic alternatives, such as authoritarianism: “Imagine this scenario: disappointment with existing institutions leads to welcoming institutional breakdown in the hope of rebuilding a more just society out of the debris, whereupon “true democracy” fails to materialize and the values of liberal cosmopolitanism are sacrificed somewhere along the way” (Strunz & Bartkowski, 2017, p. 10). Accordingly, (Strunz & Bartkowski, 2017) advocate for a more liberal approach to degrowth, based on a moderate critique of modernity, such as Habermas’ ideas on the ‘unfinished project of modernity’. In summary, there are good reasons to believe that the degrowth movement seems to question the foundation of an open, liberal society and might face marginalization because of radical criticism of modernity and liberalism.

2.5 Ecological limits and the meaning of freedom

All these arguments mentioned above, might constitute part of an explanation why degrowth remains at the margin of European societies. However, one aspect is missing in the explicit discussion on the marginalization of degrowth: the meaning of freedom. Without explicitly mentioning degrowth, a decent amount of academic literature has argued that limits to production and consumption are not compatible with modern conceptions of freedom and liberty (Fragniere, 2017; Pinto, 2019; Kish et al., 2019; Gumbert & Bohn, 2021). Investigating objections against the concept of consumption corridors, which is closely linked to the degrowth literature and calls for minimum and maximum limits of individual consumption, Gumbert and Bohn (2021) argue that freedom, in modern societies, is equated with the expansion of (consumption) choice. According to Gumbert and Bohn (2021), people will reject limits to their individual freedom “as long as the notion of limits represents a restriction of freedom to both individuals and state actors, and freedom is, in turn, closely linked to unlimited consumption options” (p.92). Thus, they suggest that the argument, that people would not except limits to consumption on the basis of their individual idea of freedom “may produce the most serious barrier for advancing the societal acceptance of consumption corridors” (Gumbert & Bohn, 2021, p.93). Accordingly, understanding the way societies perceive freedom seems crucial to

build up public support for putting limits to production and consumption. To dismantle objections against those limits, Kish et al. (2019) advocate for establishing new ways of living, which do not contradict planetary boundaries:

In the long run, these new ways of life may come to be associated with the pursuit and the experience of freedom, but in the transitional short-term period that lies just ahead, they will be experienced as constraints that are incompatible with liberty as defined by liberal rationalism. If the ontological project of the liberation of human agency is to escape its current ecological impasse and contradiction, the historical project of human liberation must also be politically and ethically transformed. (Kish et al., 2019, p.5)

They essentially call for rethinking modern conceptions of liberty and freedom. Fragnière (2017) and Pinto (2019) are even more explicit in their writings. They examine if modern conceptions of freedom are compatible with ecological limits at all. Both authors draw on Pettit's writings (e.g. Pettit, 1997; Pettit, 2003) and his distinction between the three conceptions of freedom: non-limitation, non-interference and non-domination. Unsurprisingly, Fragnière (2017) and Pinto (2019) come to similar conclusions: Both assert that conceptions of liberty that are predominant within modern societies, namely freedom as non-limitation and freedom as non-interference, are neither compatible with the idea of ecological limits nor with the policies which have to be implemented for humanity to stay in planetary boundaries (Fragnière, 2017; Pinto, 2019). In contrast, Pettit's alternative conception of freedom as non-domination, is, according to both Fragnière (2017) and Pinto (2019), appropriate for the implementation of such policies and constitutes no obstacle to the acceptance of ecological limits.³

Considering these writings, it seems likely that modern conceptions of liberty could constitute an importance hindrance for the degrowth movement, since degrowth scenarios necessarily involve limits to production and consumption. However, this has not been investigated yet. In addition, within the academic discussion on the marginalization of degrowth as such, empirical work is lacking. In order to add to the existing literature, this dissertation aims at contributing to a theoretical discourse on degrowth and the meaning of freedom by offering a theoretical discussion as well as empirical research on the matter.

Chapter 3 – What kind of freedom?

Liberty⁴ is arguably the most esteemed value in modern, democratic societies. And as we have come to understand in chapter two, considering conceptions of freedom might be essential to

³ Arguments of both Fragnière (2017) and Pinto (2019) will be further dwelled upon in chapter 3.

⁴ The terms liberty and freedom are interchangeably used in this dissertation.

understand the marginalization of the degrowth literature and its position in the world. Building on the academic debate on liberty and more explicitly Philip Pettit's (2003) distinction between three negative conceptions of freedom, namely freedom as non-limitation, freedom as non-interference and freedom as non-domination, this chapter will function as the analytical framework of the dissertation. It will provide the theoretical foundation for the qualitative research which will be presented in chapter four.

3.1 Three concepts of negative freedom

Freedom is a heavily debated concept in social sciences. What it means to be free can not only differ according to worldview, ideology or religion but also changes with personal attitude. Thus, it is not surprising that academic scholars have intensively studied on freedom and liberty in various ways. Arguably, the most influential work on liberty was written by Isaiah Berlin in 1969 in which he famously distinguished between negative and positive concepts of liberty. According to Berlin (1969) negative freedom means the absence of external constraints to the individual, while positive liberty involves active mastery of oneself. Thus, negative freedom is conceived as the freedom 'from' constraints and positive freedom is conceived as the freedom 'to' do whatever one wants. While Berlin's work has been incredibly influential in political philosophy, his argument for a coherent positive concept of liberty has been argued to be less convincing (MacCallum, 1967; Skinner, 2002; Pettit, 1997). In a more recent essay Pettit (2003) suggests that three predominant schools of thought have emerged within the debate on liberty, which postulate three different ideas on what freedom, in a negative sense, requires: freedom as non-limitation, freedom as non-interference and freedom as non-domination. While individual conceptions of liberty might move beyond these three concepts and might conceptualize liberty also in a positive way, the three concepts Pettit's distinguishes are most appropriate to the aim of this thesis. As we will soon understand, especially freedom as non-limitation and freedom as non-interference are the prevailing ways of thinking of liberty in western capitalist societies. But much more interesting for the elaboration of this thesis is the third conception, freedom as non-domination, an republican understanding of liberty (Skinner; 2002; Pettit 1997). It seems not only to be, as Fragnière (2017) and Pinto (2019) claim, more compatible with the acceptance of ecological limits, but could also relate to degrowth principles. In the following section I will shortly explain the three different conceptions of liberty distinguished by Pettit (2003).

3.1.1 Freedom as non-limitation

Pettit (2003) characterizes freedom as non-limitation as a theory of option-freedom, as it “seeks to articulate the principles whereby we can determine how much choice a person enjoys” (p.399). It suggests that every form of limitation, no matter if it is caused by humans or natural circumstances, restrains freedom. In other words, the bigger the number of options available to the individual, the freer he or she is. According to Pettit (2003), this theory of freedom has received much attention among economists who are concerned with free markets and leftist-libertarians, who equate justice with equal opportunities and options. And indeed, freedom as non-limitation, as Pettit conceived it, clearly relates to how the influential neoliberal economic theorist Milton Friedman conceptualized freedom. Friedman (1982) was convinced that economic freedom is the prerequisite of political freedom. And economic freedom, according to Friedman (1982), could best be achieved in a free market where consumers would have the freedom of choice. In his view only the availability of various similar alternatives can ensure that the exchange of goods takes place completely voluntarily (Friedmann, 1982). Thus, freedom in his conception is reduced to choice: the less choices or options you have the less freedom you enjoy. Friedman’s conception has been influential not only in the way economists think about consumer freedom on the market, but it also heavily influenced the public understanding of the term ‘freedom’ itself. Several scholars have even argued that freedom of choice, especially freedom of choice between consumption products, is increasingly defining human freedom in contemporary capitalist societies (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh 1995, Bauman [1988] 1997; Twitchell, 1999; Fiske [1989] 2000). Consumer freedom, according to Baumann, is linked to the focus on individual identity in the modern world and represents a new kind of unlimited freedom for everybody:

The method of tackling the task of self-construction offered by the consumer market is free from such limitations; it can be in principle, employed by everybody, and by all at the same time. The market method consists in selecting symbols of identity from the large pool of good on offer. (Baumann, [1988] 1997, p.63)

For Baumann ([1988] 1997), economic or consumption freedom became a substitute for the loss of freedom people experienced through their alienation from the production process caused by global capitalism. While some authors, such as Firat and Venkatesh (1995) and Twitchell (1999) celebrate this newly won kind of freedom in modern societies, others, as Baumann (1988] 1997) and Fiske ([1989] 2000), are rather critical towards consumer freedom. Pettit (2003), might not be as critical towards this modern idea of freedom, but he points out that this predominant understanding of freedom in modern societies might neglect questions of power relations and dependencies.

3.1.2 Freedom as non-interference

Pettit (2003) argues that the concept of freedom as non-interference roots in the liberal tradition. Liberal thinkers, such as Mill, Locke, Constant, Hobbes, Smith or Tocqueville were conceiving individual freedom as the absence of obstacles (Berlin, 1969). This can be detected most vividly in Thomas Hobbes' idea of freedom: "A free man is he that in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to" (Hobbes, [1651] 1991, p. 146). However, in a world without laws, a state of "natural" freedom, would lead to social chaos and human beings would certainly tend to interfere with each other. Thus, classical thinkers agreed that "there ought to exist a certain minimum area of personal freedom which must on no account be violated" (Berlin, 1969, p.171). Respectively it means that in liberal thought some regulation is certainly required which curtails individual freedom to some extent. Nevertheless, liberals do not agree on to what extent. What they, however, do agree on is, according to Berlin the following:

The defense of liberty consists in the 'negative' goal of warding off interference. To threaten a man with persecution unless he submits to a life in which he exercises no choices of his goals; to block before him every door but one, no matter how noble the prospect upon which it opens, or how benevolent the motives of those who arrange this, is to sin against the truth that he is a man, a being with a life of his own to live. This is liberty as it has been conceived by liberals in the modern world from the days of Erasmus (some would say of Occam) to our own."

(Berlin, 1969, pp.174)

Thus, the liberal conception of freedom, or the 'negative freedom' as Berlin conceives it, can be described as the absence of interference. According to Berlin, being unfree "implies the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act. You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings" (Berlin, 1969, p.169). Thus, in this conception any more or less intentional intervention from another human being is considered to limit the freedom of the other. Looking at economic theory, it becomes obvious that this way of evaluating liberty has also been incredibly influential in the way we think about economic freedom. The influential economist Friedrich August von Hayek follows the liberal tradition and defines freedom in his well-known book *The Constitution of Liberty*, similar to Berlin's understanding of 'negative liberty'. Hayek (2011), just like Berlin, understands freedom as the absence of external obstacles that could restrain individual action. He explicitly defines liberty as the absence of coercion, which he understands as "such control of the environment or circumstances of a person by another that, in order to avoid greater evil, he is forced to act not according to a coherent plan of his own but

to serve the ends of another” (Hayek, 2011, p.71). However, according to Hayek (2011) people can only be constrained by the action or inaction of other individuals, not by social processes. In this sense, consequences of free market capitalism, such as the unequal distribution of wealth are not considered a restriction to personal freedom. Thus, this conception of freedom is clearly linked to the belief in free market capitalism, and it is often argued that it dominates popular thought about freedom in western capitalist societies (Skinner 2002; Pettit 2003).

3.1.3 Freedom as non-domination

Freedom as non-domination roots, according to both Pettit (1997; 2003) and Skinner (2002), in the republican tradition. By reading classical philosophical texts, it was Skinner (2002) who detected this third conception of liberty in classical thought. He traces back the line of thought, that arbitrary powers fundamentally oppose freedom, to writers from the middle-ages and Roman times. This idea is particularly well demonstrated in the distinction between slaves and free persons in roman law: "Slavery is an institution of the *ius gentium* by which someone is, contrary to nature, subjected to the dominion of someone else” (Skinner, 2002, p.248). Thus, a free person must be someone who is not dominated by someone else, but able to act out of his own will and right. Building on Skinner’s work, Pettit (1997) is, however, much more systematic in his description of a potential third concept of liberty. He claims that the republican idea of freedom as non-domination was dominant in political philosophy before the American Revolution, after which it was replaced by the liberal idea of freedom as non-interference. According to Pettit (1997), Hobbes conception of freedom supported British resistance against the American Revolution, because understanding freedom as non-interference made it easier to argue that Americans were free even under the British crown. But what is surprising for Pettit, is that the republican tradition was basically forgotten: "Liberty as non-domination—republican liberty—had not only been lost to political thinkers and activists; it had even become invisible to the historians of political thought." (Pettit, 1997,p. 50). But how does Pettit conceptualize freedom as non-domination? First of all, he defines what domination means to him: "One agent dominates another if and only if they have a certain power over that other, in particular a power of interference on an arbitrary basis" (Pettit, 1997, p.52). In addition, domination is always intentional which means that interference without intention cannot be counted as domination. But then what makes an act of interference arbitrary? For Pettit (1997) arbitrariness begins when no active consent is given by the individual in question. He holds that “we imply that it is chosen or rejected without reference to the interests, or the opinions, of those affected." (Pettit, 1997, p.56). In reverse this also means that state interference does not have to be

arbitrary in every case, it is indeed non-arbitrary if it resembles the world-view and will of the public. Further, being unaware of being dominated does not mean not to be dominated because "consent to a form of interference is not sufficient as a guard against arbitrariness" (Pettit, 1997, p.62). Hence, someone that consents to a contract, which allows another person or institution to dominate him or her is, in Pettit's understanding of freedom, not free. But domination can also exist without any interference, as "someone can be in a position to interfere with me at their pleasure, even while it is very improbable that they will actually interfere" (Pettit, 1997, p.64). On the contrary it is "equally true that one agent may actually interfere with another without dominating that person. The public official or authority who interferes with people in a way that is forced to track their interests and ideas fails to enjoy subjugating power over the person affected" (Pettit, 1997, p.65). This means the law itself decides if an act of interference implies domination or not. If the law does not in itself represent a form of domination, people will still be considered free. Thus, Pettit defines non-domination as follows: "Non-domination in the sense that concerns us, then, is the position that someone enjoys when they live in the presence of other people and when, by virtue of social design, none of those others dominates them" (Pettit, 1997, p.67). According to Pettit (2003), this third conception of freedom is not common in our societies today, but it should be considered as a possible alternative.

3.2 Liberty between growth and degrowth

Having distinguished those three different lines of thought regarding liberty, it is now time to understand in which way they relate to the capitalist growth imperative on the one hand and to degrowth proposals on the other hand. It is not hard to grasp, that the imperative of economic growth is closely linked to freedom conceived as both non-limitation and non-interference. The current economic system requires, as we have learned in chapter two, economic growth. Market capitalism is in turn, built on the idea of economic freedom, which is defined in the *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* as follows: "Economic freedom is the ability of individuals to make their own economic decisions without interference or limitations by government or government's protection of anti-market behavior in favor of powerful groups and these group's abuse of this power to limit market choices of other" (McMahon, 2014). Economic freedom, in other words, is conceived as freedom from interference and limitation. Pettit (2006) explains the appeal of the market in terms of freedom quite vividly: "it represents a regime of unobstructed consumer choice and, as a bonus, a regime in which consumer options may be expected to increase and diversify under the pressure of competition" (p.131). Considering that both freedom as non-limitation and freedom as non-

interference are dominating conceptions in modern industrialized societies it is not surprising that market capitalism is often considered a perfect example, in which people enjoy true freedom. In addition, economic growth usually results in an increased number of options to choose from. Thus, freedom as non-limitation, in particular, has a tight connection to economic growth (Fragnière, 2017). In this conception, economic growth is considered a vehicle for liberty and every hindrance to growth is regarded a hindrance to freedom.

Degrowth on the other side, as we have learned in chapter two, is essentially anticapitalistic and rejects market capitalism as an economic system. Rather it explicitly calls for limits and regulations on production and consumption. Thus, freedom as non-limitation is obviously not compatible with degrowth scenarios. Pinto (2019) gives an example to illustrate this claim: “Forbidding private vehicles into cities while allowing public transport, for example, does not constitute a radical limit. One could still access the city but the number of options to do so would be limited, thus reducing one’s freedom according to non-limitation” (Pinto, 2019, p. 7). In other words, even ecological limits, which are not man-made, would constrain freedom if you conceive freedom as non-limitation. Freedom as non-interference, however, seems to be better compatible with ecological limits, since natural limits for an individual caused by climate change and environmental degradation are not considered as limiting freedom in this conception. However, both Fragnière (2017) and Pinto (2019) argue that the actual implementation of policies trying to prevent these environmental impacts, such as CO2 limitations or fishing quotas, have human origin and thus, are definitely considered to constrain freedom. And even if liberal authors acknowledge limits to freedom as non-interference, the impact of those policies clearly exceeds their imagined limitations to human action. Thus, degrowth proposals relate little to conceiving freedom as non-limitation or non-interference. But how could freedom be conceptualized in a society organized according to degrowth principles? Could, in theory, a degrowth conception of freedom be built on Pettit’s concept of freedom as non-domination?

Freedom as non-domination is indeed, in theory, much more compatible with the degrowth movement’s call for regulations and limitations of the economy. Pettit (2006) holds that market regulations, of whatever form, are compatible with freedom as non-domination. He is convinced that by "perpetrating public interference, the state can be a nonarbitrary presence that conditions but does not compromise people’s freedom" (Pettit, 2006 p.147). Similarly, Fragnière (2017) and Pinto (2019) hold that conceiving freedom as non-domination does not contradict laws or regulations on the market at all. In contrary, the rule of law, which is deliberately controlled, does not subject citizens to domination but is a necessary condition to

act out their freedom. Accordingly, freedom can remain possible under stringent environmental policies, because as long as policies and their implementations are subject to open accountability and contestation, people are not dominated by them (Fragnière, 2017). In this sense, if you conceive freedom as non-domination, your options do not have to be various, they rather have to be minimal and sorely need to relate to basic liberties, which allow to lead a meaningful life (Fragnière, 2017). But degrowth does not only call for the downscaling of production, it is also, as we have learned in chapter one, a call for a radically different society. Comparing the degrowth proposals to Pettit's concept it seems that they could create a society based on the principles of freedom as non-domination. First of all, a degrowth society would free people from the domination that results of current socio-economic conditions created by market-capitalism. With its complex technological systems and industrial production, market capitalism creates radical monopolies which foster various forms of domination and dependence through socio-economic inequalities. In a degrowth scenario, production would be downscaled and technological systems would be simplified. In addition, commoning, the social practices of giving, taking, using and sharing, are among the basic principles of degrowth (Helfrich & Bollier, 2014). Thus, in a degrowth scenario, people are able to access products, not because they have the money to do so, but because they are part of a community that owns them. Thus, the socio-economic status of an individual becomes less relevant for the agent to act freely. Another important factor in this discussion is the way the degrowth movement envisions organizational structures and government. According to D'Alisa et.al (2014), degrowth supporters advocate for deliberative democratic self-organization on a local level. This form of social organization seems to match perfectly with the conception of freedom as non-domination. As mentioned in the previous section, for Pettit (1997), domination starts in the moment, in which someone does not give his active consent. Thus, since in a deliberate degrowth society all members would have to actively consent to the laws and regulations implemented, domination, as Pettit conceives it, would be avoided in a degrowth society.

Thus, coming to an interim conclusion, freedom as non-limitation and freedom as non-interference, on the one side, are closely linked to growth and market capitalism but seem incompatible with regulations based on ecological limits and thus, also incompatible with degrowth scenarios. Freedom as non-domination, on the other side, seems to be compatible with a degrowth society, because the concept does not reject regulations based on ecological limits *per se*. In addition, degrowth principles of downscaling of production, commons and deliberative democratic self-organization even contribute to free people from domination, as Pettit conceives it. Thus, in theory a degrowth conception of freedom could indeed build on

Pettit's concept of freedom as non-domination. Whether or not degrowth proponents conceive freedom as non-domination will be investigated in the following empirical study.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The previous chapter has introduced the academic debate on conceptualizations of liberty and showed that degrowth scenarios are most likely not compatible with the two predominant ways of thinking about freedom in Western democratic societies. This could in turn constitute an obstacle to the degrowth movement, because freedom is arguable the most powerful value within modern Western identities. On the contrary, however, a third conception, namely freedom as non-domination, seems to support degrowth principles and thus, could in theory, create a starting point to conceptualize an alternative idea of freedom for the degrowth movement. The following empirical part of this thesis will test these theoretical assumptions through a collective case study and try to understand the prevalent conception of freedom of degrowth activists from Spain, Portugal and Germany through semi-structured interviews. This empirical research has two clearly defined objectives. First of all, it intends to understand the interviewees' relationship and attitudes towards the degrowth movement in order to make sure that their values align with degrowth principles. Secondly, it aims to understand their conceptions of freedom to assess which topics could be interesting to look at for further research on an alternative degrowth conception of freedom. Throughout this chapter, the qualitative research method is introduced in detail. It explains how the study was designed, how the primary data was collected, how the research participants were chosen, how the data will be analyzed in chapter five and finally it also points to possible limitations of this study.

4.1 A qualitative approach: Collective case study of degrowth activists

In order to conduct a legitimate empirical research that answers the research question and to ensure meaningful results, it was crucial to decide for a suitable method for data collection. As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this thesis is to understand the role of conceptions of freedom in the marginalization of the degrowth movement. Since a quantitative study would not have allowed for an in-depth analysis of people's conceptions of freedom, a qualitative approach was considered more appropriate for the aim of this thesis. The usage of qualitative research methods has considerably grown in recent years and has become a common research method in the social sciences. According to Flick (2014) qualitative research is of special importance in the social sciences today because it captures the "pluralization of life worlds" of contemporary societies (p.11). In other words, it enables the understanding of human behavior

in highly diversified social environments, in which various lifestyles and subcultures have emerged (Flick, 2014, p.12). In addition, qualitative research provides a valuable opportunity to explore people's thoughts in depth and to get an insight into their individual perceptions, experiences, attitudes and emotions (Patton, 2002). Thus, qualitative research presents itself as the perfect research method to understand people's perceptions of freedom and liberty.

Qualitative research can be conducted in various ways, but for this research the choice fell on conducting a collective case study. According to Flick (2014) case studies allow the researcher to get an in-depth understanding of "the process under study in a very detailed and exact way" (p.122). In the beginning of the research it was considered to solely investigate one single case, namely a cooperative in Portugal, but later it was decided to interview several degrowth activists working in different initiatives around Europe to gather more versatile data on the subject. According to Creswell (2007), just as in single case studies one issue or concern is selected, but in a collective case study "the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue" (p.74). In other words, a collective case study simply uses more than one case to investigate a particular phenomenon. However, the aim here is not to compare the different cases with each other, but to explore different dimensions of the same phenomenon.

4.2 Selection of cases: Practicing degrowth in Spain, Portugal and Germany

For the research the decision was taken to interview degrowth activists from Portugal, Spain and Germany because of the researcher's knowledge of the languages and existing initiatives in those three countries. It was decided to interview two persons from each country. However, due to busy schedules on the side of one of the Spanish activists, only one Spanish activist could be interviewed. All five interviewed activists were part of initiatives mentioned on the local degrowth realities map on www.degrowth.info. This website, run by the German non-governmental organization *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*, is the international degrowth web portal, where people can inform themselves about the degrowth movement, learn about current projects and get involved. As the local degrowth realities map on the website shows, degrowth initiatives are various and degrowth activism can be practiced in many different ways. People who support and advocate for degrowth principles often start cooperatives, live in eco-villages, write journalistic articles about degrowth or organize workshops and informative events around degrowth ideas. The six chosen activists for this study all practice at least one of these activities to advocate for degrowth principles.

In Portugal two different people were interviewed who are both involved in establishing cooperatives in rural places. The first person was Jorge. He holds a PhD in economics from the

Technical University of Berlin (2010-2013), a Master in Development Economics (HTW Berlin, 2008-2009), and a degree in Economics from the New University of Lisbon (2001-2005). He was a founding member of the artistic collective *Altes Finanzamt* in Berlin (2010-2013) and worked on rural development projects in India, Thailand and Indonesia between 2006 and 2008. In addition, he was the coordinator of impact studies in the area of renewable energy in several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean between 2013 and 2019. Jorge is one of the founders and current president of the *Cooperativa Integral Minga* in Montemor-o-Novo, a small town, one hour south-west from Lisbon. On their webpage the cooperative states that their aim is to promote the development of Montemor-o-Novo, in the logic of local consumption and environmental and social responsibility and emerge as a convergence and transition platform to a cleaner and fairer economy (Cooperative Integral Minga, n.d.). The cooperative has a small shop in Montemor-o-Novo, in which they sell products from local farmers and artisans. In addition, the cooperative provides the bureaucratic and legal apparatus to all residents of Montemor-o-Novo to create their own business. The second interview partner from Portugal was Graca, a PhD student in Sociology at the Universidade da Beira Interior, where she is developing research on degrowth and care in local initiatives. She is a sociologist, has a specialization in gender equality and a post-graduation in project management. In the last 25 years her professional activity has always been linked to civic and solidarity initiatives. In addition, Graca is the co-founder of the cooperative *CooLabora* in Covilhã, a small town in the interior of Portugal. *CooLabora* is a social intervention cooperative created in 2008. On their webpage the cooperative states that their aim is to contribute to the development of the people and organizations in Covilhã through innovative and solidary strategies that promote equal opportunities, the deepening of democracy, civic participation, collaborative learning and social cohesion (Missão e objetivos, n.d.). They run several projects in the rural area to fight domestic violence, promote gender equality and reduce social inequalities. In Spain Juan Ignacio Marín was interviewed. Juan was born in Costa Rica, but his family is Spanish and he lived in Spain for several years during his studies. He holds a Master degree in International Peace, Conflict and Development Studies from the Valencian University Jaume I and wrote his Master thesis about the degrowth perspective and alternative development measures. In 2016, he founded his own blog *Kendu Kateak*, where he publishes articles about international armed conflicts and degrowth. On the website the blog reveals that its mission is the promotion of degrowth values and the culture of peace (Kendu Kateak About, n.d.). In Germany Niklas and Christiane were interviewed. Niklas holds a Master degree in chemistry. After his studies he worked as a climate campaigner for the non-governmental organization Oxfarm Germany. At the moment he is as

a self-employed consultant for companies as well as public institutions in Germany on issues such as healthy work environments and sustainability. He co-founded the initiative *Common Future e.V.*, an organization for socio-ecological change, in 2009. At the beginning they documented workshops, conferences and talks on degrowth and other climate related issues. Today, they also give workshops to activists. On their webpage the initiative sets out their aim to inform, qualify and network people for social and ecological change (Common Future, n.d.). Christiane is a freelance journalist specialized in post-growth, alternative economy and social change. She holds a Master in Islamic Studies and Philosophy and lived part of her life in Syria and the Arabic Emirates. Previously, she worked as a journalist for Deutsche Welle and at the UN Climate Change Secretariat. Christiane also co-organized the 2014 Degrowth Conference in Leipzig and managed the blog of the degrowth web portal until 2017. Christiane is the only participant of the research which has lived in a ecovillage. She lived in the ecovillage Sieben Linden in the north of Germany for a few years. The ecovillage, which exists already since 1997, is a holistic community project with the aim of realizing sustainable lifestyles that greatly reduce the ecological footprint (Ökodorf Sieben Leben, n.d.).

The five participants are diverse in age, region of residence and in the way, they advocate for degrowth principles. However, all six participants have higher education, either a Master or a Phd., and have followed the academic degrowth discourse or even participated in the academic conferences. They have a strong relationship to the ideas and principles of the degrowth movement, without actually being personally part of the academic movement itself. Thus, these people might not be key actors within the academic movement, but they represent the small part of society which approves and supports degrowth principles through their activism or work.

4.3 Semi-structured interview guide and data collection

To investigate the selected cases, it was decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with the five participants. According to Patton (2002), interviews are one of the most frequently used qualitative methods because they allow the researcher to easily understand the participant's perspective, gather their stories, experiences, opinions, behavior, feelings, attitudes and knowledge. Semi-structured interviews, in particular, have the great advantage that the participants can express their ideas freely and are not subjected to pre-formulated answers. They allow the participants to have full liberty to express their opinion and views on the issue at hand (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). In addition, this type of interview offers a maximum of flexibility and spontaneity for the researcher as well and allows him to respond to individual differences

of the participant's context. He can probe and ask follow-up questions that can deepen the conversation (Patton, 2002). Since all six interviewees had a particularly different personal background and different ways to express their thoughts, this research method proved itself to be ideal for the research conducted.

The prepared interview guide⁵ for all five interviews was divided into three sections. First of all, it intended to ask the participants about their personal background, their education and their current job. In the second part of the interview the participants were asked about their personal relation to the degrowth movement and in the third section they were asked to reveal their perception of freedom. Each section was introduced by a general, open question. Additionally, theory-driven questions were asked during the course of the interview. As the first interview revealed that one of the theory-driven questions was too confusing for the participant and did not fulfill its intended purpose, the question was replaced by a more valuable inquiry that came up during the first interview. In addition, the participants were reminded at the beginning of the interview that the researcher is mostly interested in how he or she personally perceives and experiences degrowth as a movement and his or her own, individual ideas on what it means to be free, regardless of his or her knowledge of scientific definitions. Before the participants were interviewed, they were informed that the interview was recorded and that the collected information was only to be used in this dissertation. In addition, they had to sign a consent form that was composed in accordance with the ISCTE ethical code. All interviews, except the first one, were conducted online via video chat during the period from mid-April 2021 to the beginning of June 2021. Except one interview that was conducted in German, all other interviews were conducted in English. Before the interviews were analyzed they were transcribed.

4.3 Qualitative data analysis and thematic coding

Analyzing qualitative data aims at making “statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning making in the material and what is represented in it” (Flick, 2014, p.370). This means that the researcher should not only pay close attention to what is actually said, but also to what is not said and to what meaning could even lay beyond the participants self-awareness. In other words, this implies that qualitative data analysis demands the researcher to 'read between the lines' (Flick, 2014, p.370). In order to arrive at such an understanding and interpretation of the raw data, it can be analyzed in several ways. However, for the aim of this it was decided to use a thematic analysis. In general it can be said that a

⁵ you can find the interview guide in the appendix of this dissertation

“thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) it is a widely used method in the social sciences. They advocate for the usage of thematic analysis in psychology and provide guidelines for researchers to use this method. Those guidelines comprise a few basic steps, which were closely followed in the analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. First of all the researcher should get familiar with the data. This means that he or she re-reads the data several times to identify points of interest and generate initial thematic codes. In a second step, he or she makes an initial list of items from the data set and reorganizes them to find reoccurring patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). From this collection of codes the researcher will then be able to extract over-reaching themes. And in a last step he or she might be able to find even broader patterns in the data and identify relationships between codes and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The first part of the interview, in which the interviewees told the researcher about their personal background was not included in the analysis. The questions in this part of the interview were not directed towards the research questions, but aimed at getting to know the interviewees better and at creating a relaxed atmosphere. The second part of the interview, in which the interviewees revealed their relation to the degrowth movement, was given attention in the analysis but it’s discussion will not take up much space in the following chapter. The most important part for answering the research question of this thesis is the analysis of the last part of the interview, in which the interviewees were asked to share their perception of freedom and liberty. Here all questions directly aimed towards answering the research question. Having said that, chapter five will only include a small part on the result of the analysis of second part of the interview, and mainly focus on the results of the analysis of the third part of the interview. In a last step, those results will be discussed in comparison to the theoretical hypothesis elucidated in the beginning of this chapter. In this last section it will be evaluated if the findings of this research might indicate that the interviewed degrowth activists distance themselves from perceiving freedom as non-limitation and non-interference and if they align with the perception of freedom as non-domination.

4.4 Limitations

As every research has limitations also this study is not free of potential pitfalls that might constrain the quality of its result. First of all, it is limited by the circumstances of the study. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying difficulty to travel, four of the five semi-structured interviews had to be conducted online. In the context of qualitative research online

interviews are often criticized due absence of authentic human interaction (e.g. Allen, 2017). It is suggested that online interviews lack the richness and spontaneity which normal face-to-face interviews can create. However, part from the fact that under the current circumstances it would not have been possible to conduct the interviews in any other way, online interviewing also provides substantial advantages in the context of qualitative research. The setting of an online interview can enhance the participant's comfort. Being in his or her home, in a comfortable atmosphere, where he or she feels safe, can be incredibly advantageous for an in-depth interview.

The study is however, also limited by the chosen research method itself. A common critique of qualitative research is that it can never be statistically representative and therefore never allow for generalizations. And indeed, the scope of this dissertation clearly does not allow for any kind of generalization about proponents of degrowth principles nor about attitudes among the general public. However, for answering the research question it is not necessary to be able to generalize the findings. The study of the cases at hand only creates a starting point to understand what kind of alternative conceptions of freedom might exist among people that support degrowth principles. Another critique of the chosen method tackles limitations of conducting semi-structured interviews. The high degree of flexibility could lead to biased interviews. Asking different questions or asking them in a different way could potentially cause variation in answers. This in turn, makes it impossible to compare the interviews with each other. However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter the aim of this dissertation is not to compare the cases with each other but to gather versatile data on one phenomenon. Finally, also the chosen method to analyze the gathered data, namely the thematic analysis can involve possible pitfalls. It can, for example, happen that the researcher mismatches codes with overarching themes or fails to provide adequate examples from the data to emphasize the themes convincingly. However, this can be avoided by constant re-reading and re-evaluation of the codes and themes in the research process. In addition, Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate for this method, because it is a relatively easy and quick method to learn and therefore very accessible to researchers with little or no experience of qualitative research.

As this discussion on the limitation of the research has demonstrated, even though the circumstances of this study might have posed challenges to the research and the research method could potentially lead to pitfalls within the research process, the advantages of the way this study was conducted outweigh its weaknesses to a high degree. The only crucial point, the reader needs to keep in mind reading the following chapter, is that the findings have to be read with caution. This is a qualitative research. It does not allow for any kind of generalization.

Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter will illustrate the findings of the thematic analysis of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with five degrowth activists from Portugal, Spain and Germany. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the findings will be presented in two different sections. First of all, I will shortly address what the interviews revealed about the participants relation and attitudes towards the degrowth movement. The second, more extensive part of this chapter, will present the participants’ conceptions of freedom and liberty.

5.1 Relation with and attitudes towards the degrowth movement

As mentioned in the previous presentation of the five interviewees in the method chapter, all of them seem to actively support degrowth ideas through their work or their free time activism. However, to ensure that the participants actually do believe in degrowth principles, the interview guide included a few questions that were directed towards a deeper understanding of their relationship with and their attitudes towards the degrowth movement.

5.1.1 Degree of involvement of the participants

The degree to which the five interviewees are or were involved with the academic degrowth movement differed to a certain extent. Whereas two of them had been involved in organizing degrowth conferences or even wrote academic articles in the field already, one person took part in several conferences, got in touch with the people involved and wrote her PHD in the field of degrowth and the other two were merely overserving the degrowth movement from a distance without actively taking part in the conferences or discussions of the academic movement. Table 1 summarizes the variation of the degrees to which the five participants had already been involved with the degrowth movement so far when they were interviewed.

Degree of involvement	Number of participants
Direct involvement	2
Personal contact	1
Observer	2

Table 1: Degree of involvement of Participants. Source: Author’s own elaboration.

5.1.2 General attitudes towards the degrowth movement

While the extent to which the participants had been involved with the academic degrowth movement varies, all five interviews revealed general *support* for degrowth principles. Four of the five interviewees reported that they instantly approved degrowth ideas, when they first came in contact with them. Juan, for example, reported that he directly approved degrowth principles after his teachers introduced him some of the readings:

“And then when we started the development classes, a couple of American teachers that we had that were amazing. They introduced us to the degrowth topic. So I started investigating about it. And I really liked it.” (Juan, personal communication, May 1, 2021)

Christiane also felt a direct connection to degrowth principles when she first read about them. She even seemed to have felt an instant and deep connection to the ideas expressed within the academic movement:

“I started reading this kind of stuff in 2010/2011, and that's when I first noticed that there were economists writing this kind of stuff and I thought, "Oh, look at that! Even people with a degree in economics think what I think, not just me. (...) I just saw, “Ah, there are a lot of people, they're thinking about it, they're writing great things. It speaks from my soul. It kind of gives me a lift. I think it's great. It needs to be brought to attention more”.” (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021)

Niklas similarly described an instant fascination of this, to him, new and radical idea and Jorge reported that he couldn't exactly remember the moment but imagined himself to have reacted good to it. Nevertheless, one interviewee, namely Graça, reported to have hesitated at first to agree with degrowth principles, because they seemed to contradict her belief in the importance of development work. She seems to have realized the potential of it only after an in-depth discussion in the aftermath of a degrowth conference:

“And then in 2018 when I started my PhD on alternative local initiatives, I attended a debate about degrowth in Coimbra I met Prof. D'Alisa there. And we talked a lot, and they came to Covilhã to make two workshops at Coolabora. And we debated a lot about what does it mean. And in the beginning, I felt a lot of curiosity, and also some hesitation. Because I have worked all my life in local development initiatives. And I realized that degrowth is also a criticism or a radical criticism for development. But I realized that degrowth is not only about reduction of consumption and production but an alternative proposal for another society with not so much consumption or reduction of consumption and production.” (Graça, personal communication, May 14, 2021)

Despite a general notion of support of degrowth principles among all interviewees, Jorge is the only one who also expressed strong *criticism* towards the academic movement itself within the course of the interview:

“I'm not a degrowth fundamentalist. Actually I was always on the border. (...) But I have a problem with the degrowth movement. (...) But they tend to give heterogenic solutions,

instead of just letting the deconstruction to us and let emerge various solutions.“ (Jorge, personal communication, April 18, 2021)

During the whole interview Jorge repeatedly expressed his critique on the degrowth movement. While he seems to agree with the urgency to act - reduce production and consumption and fight poverty - in his point of view the solutions the academic degrowth movement suggests are not solving any real problems. Interestingly, especially the idea to generate a basic income is absurd to him:

“The basic social income is part of poverty, it enforces poverty. It's about not being empowered by your autonomy and self-organization, collective self-organization, it's in fact destroying self-organization, by making everyone dependent on an income that comes from a central government. So instead of developing solidarity-based relationships, where we need each other to solve our individual problems, and find collaborative solutions, we are becoming even more individualistic, because we only depend on a transfer from the rich. So that's the great problem of the basic income. It's very similar to any subsidy to the poor people. Because it's not structurally solving the issue, it's not telling you, let's do the right to housing, and implement the right to housing. No, it gives you money, and you pay to the landlord. So I give you 500 per month, and I give to everyone in Portugal, 500 per month, how much will the rent increase? 500 per month? So it's a treasure to whom? For the people or for the landlords?” (Jorge, personal communication, April 18, 2021)

Thus, he clearly rejects a common proposal of the academic degrowth movement. However, as he clarified later on in the interview, he does not reject degrowth principles as a whole:

“So I liked the concept, I think it's a good concept. But I think we are lacking a bit, and this is very important, structural critical thinking, and a very crucial action research approach, like you research but you need to practice, you research a technique of how to produce better trees, you need to go and plant them and see if it works.” (Jorge, personal communication, April 18, 2021).

Instead he rather criticizes the movements detachment from the grass-roots and their ignorance of the real problems of the people. Having said that, even though one of the interviewees clearly expressed a strong critique towards the academic degrowth movement, all seem to agree that degrowth principles in general are valuable for reorganizing Western societies in the future and should be advocated for.

5.1.3 Reasons to support degrowth

As Table 2 illustrates, the reasons which the interviewees expressed for their support of degrowth were diverse and all five participants focused on different aspects of the movement to express their support. This is not surprising, since, as I have mentioned in the first chapter, the degrowth movement itself is marked by its heterogeneity. One of the participants even

directly addressed this issue and observed: “But it doesn't feel to be such a consistent movement to me, somehow” (Niklas, personal communication, May 14, 2021).

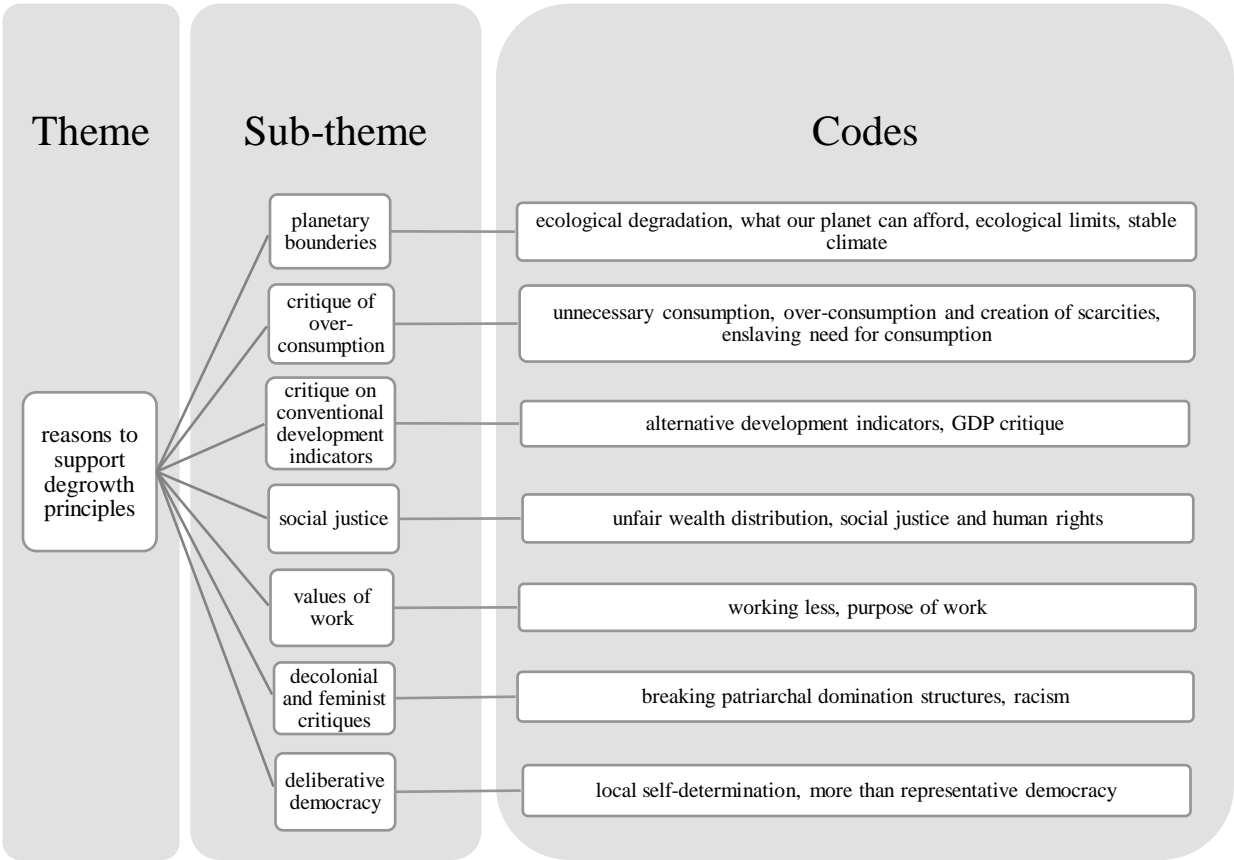


Table 2: From Codes to Themes: Reasons to support degrowth principles. Source: Author's own elaboration.

Nevertheless, I was able to find some consistent patterns within their discussion of the potentials of degrowth. Some of the themes were mentioned several times and addressed by more than only one interviewee. The strongest theme which reappeared in four of the five interviews was linked to the existence of *planetary boundaries*. A vivid example of this thought pattern is expressed in a quote from the interview with Christiane:

Yes, there are clearly planetary boundaries. Or simply the need to observe these limits that nature simply shows us. It is quite clear that we want to keep the climate stable. We want to preserve biological diversity. We want to preserve the soil, the oceans, in other words, our entire basis of life. They have been completely overused and destroyed everywhere. In this respect, it is clear that this capitalist model cannot continue.” (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021)

The concern with climate change, loss of biodiversity and resource exploitation was noted by all four interviewees who addressed this issue. It is not surprising that this argument was mentioned so often during the interviews, since, as mentioned in chapter 1, this argument is an important part of the degrowth critique on the growth paradigm. Interestingly, however, Niklas

also expressed a concern which is less linked to degrowth but often put forward by the influential youth movement ‘Fridays for Future’, namely the survival of future generations:

“I mean, there's the easy one, which is the ecologic reason that building on growth, means apart from human exploitation, also resource exploitation, and this will run into limits, which will then like narrow down our chances to host a good livelihood for future generations and also for those who live here already. (Niklas, personal communication, May 14, 2021)

Another pattern which could be detected in three of the five interviews relates to a radical *critic of over-consumption*. Juan, for example, advocated for a rethinking of our consumption habits:

“We have to make our society understand that if you want to contribute to have a better world, you don't have to consume things that you don't really need. (Juan, personal communication, May 1, 2021).

While this critique became clear in all three interviews which addressed the issue of over-consumption, Christine added another aspect concerning consumption:

“It creates so much waste and things that are not needed and on the other hand artificially creates scarcities where something is needed.” (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021)

She addresses the capitalist paradox of unnecessary over-consumption on the one hand and the simultaneous creation of scarcities on the other hand. The critique on the current state of production and consumption is a common argument within the degrowth movement. Thus, it is not surprising that three of the five interviews mention it in one or another way. Another common argument for organizing societies around degrowth principles relates to the idea that constant growth does not make us happy. This goes hand in hand with a radical *critique on conventional development indicators* such as the GDP. This argument was put forward by two of the five interviewees. Despite his critique on the movement, the critical reflection on development measurement is what Jorge values most among all ideas related to degrowth:

“So degrowth is the questioning of the usage of the measurement indicator, and its evolution as a reflection of our social goals. So any questioning of that indicator, or of that social goal is very important, so that we open our minds and question deeper what is around us and what we really want for us or for our communities”. (Jorge, personal communication, April 16, 2021)

Similarly, also Juan was inspired by the degrowth critique on development indicators and even decided to write his master dissertation on the topic:

“So I started investigating about degrowth and I did my thesis about alternative development measures, about an index called “Happy Planet Index”. They analyze not only the GDP. So I started analyzing different alternative measures and I found this one that I really liked because it measures not only economic perspectives, but also health, education and of course, the ecological pathway and ecological footprint. So I really like it since I started writing about it.” (Juan, personal communication, May 1, 2021)

As the critique on development indicators in one of the main aspects of the degrowth critique on the growth paradigm, it is, however, surprising that the theme only appeared in two of the five interviews. Another topic, which is definitely related to degrowth but not so often explicitly mentioned in the literature is *social justice*. Interestingly both women I interviewed for this thesis mentioned that they believe degrowth to be a path towards more social justice in the world. Speaking about her reasons to support degrowth, Graça focused on unequal distribution of wealth:

I think it's also unsustainable and unfair, that wealth is not distributed. We have people that are very, very rich and people dying, when they cross the Mediterranean Sea or from starvation for instance. And this is very, very unfair. (Graça, personal communication, May 14, 2021)

And Christiane argued even more boldly, that values, such as social justice and human rights could only be achieved through degrowth principles:

“And then, of course, the question is: we have all these billions of people in the world now, are values like social justice and human rights important to us? If so, we have to say quite clearly: here are the borders and there are our values. Then nothing other than degrowth will come out of it. Then nothing else can come out of it.” (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021)

Some themes, such as the *reduction of work-time*, *decolonial and feminist critics*, and *deliberate democracy* were only mentioned individually. While a discussion of those themes in relation to the degrowth movement could indeed be interesting, the scope and aim of this paper does not allow to dive deeper in those findings. All in all, the interviews showed that there exist diverse interests and motivations to support degrowth principles among the five participants. But the reasons that were reported most for supporting degrowth principles seem to align perfectly with the arguments put forward by the degrowth movement itself.

5.2 Conceptions of freedom and liberty

Having understood the participants attitudes towards the degrowth movement it is now time for the essential part of this analysis. The next section will finally reveal how the participants conceptualize liberty and freedom. In general it was observed that the interviews had two big themes: *prerequisites for freedom* and *tensions with conventional conceptualizations of freedom*. This is not surprising, because the interview questions were designed to make the interviewees delve into a discussion on what is, in his or her opinion, needed to be free and in which way this might be controversial to conventional ways of thinking about freedom. Table 3 illustrates the findings related to the first theme, namely *prerequisites for freedom*, in a comprehensive way.

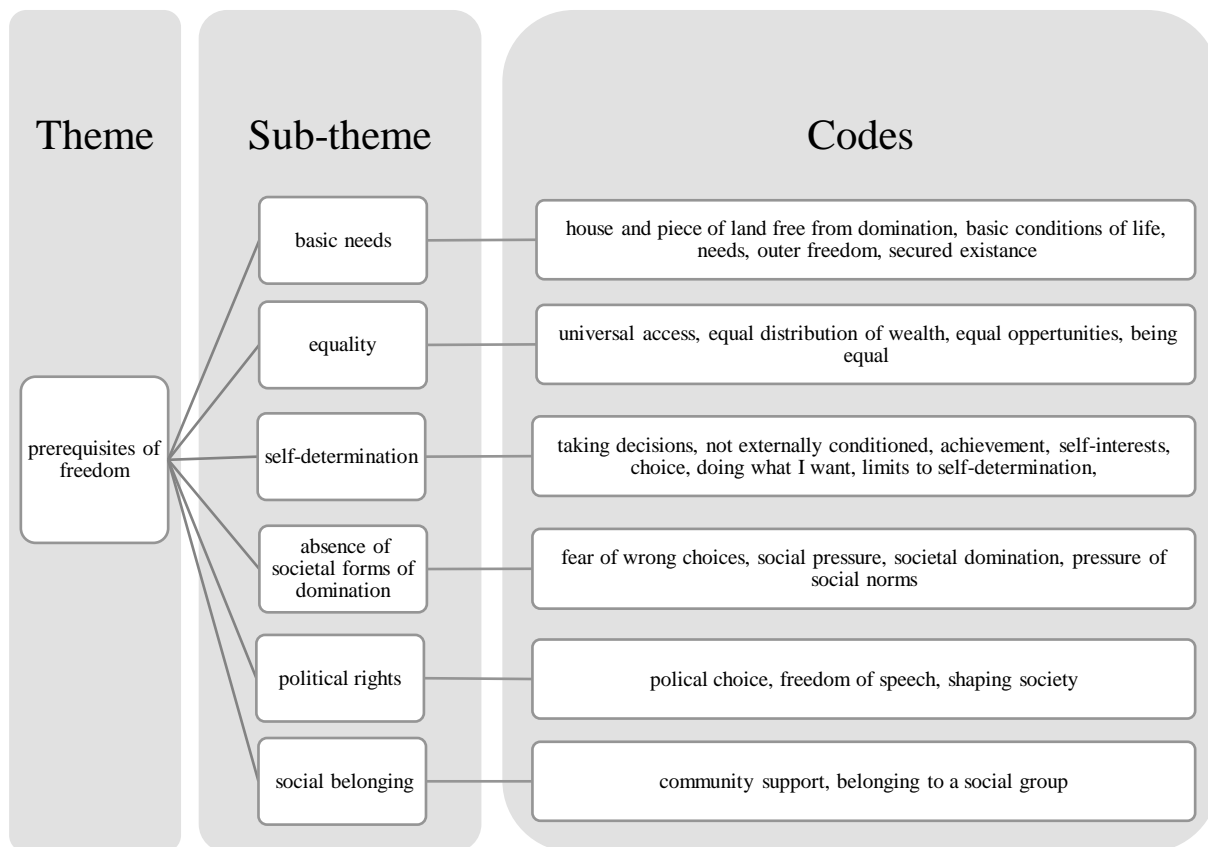


Table 3: From Codes to Themes: Concepts of Freedom. Source: Author's own elaboration.

5.2.1 Freedom as fulfillment of basic needs

The first requirement for freedom most of the interviewees addressed was the *fulfillment of basic needs*. Four out of the five participants were convinced that nobody could feel and be free if his or her basic conditions of life were not secured. The way Graça expressed her thought on this matter illustrates the core of this concern:

Those who live in scarcity cannot be free. Some people, for instance, cannot easily guarantee their needs or the needs of their family. They can't be free.” (Graça, personal communication, May 14, 2021)

Niklas and Christiane expressed themselves very similarly. However, the most striking example of this concern was expressed by Jorge. He described a moment in his life in which he felt incredibly free and which made him realize that the fulfillment of basic needs is what gives people freedom:

“ It' was in 2007, when I was in Thailand. I was living on a farm. And everyone that was in that farm, had the right either to put a tent or eventually built their own house. I was there some months, not for long, but it was so good to live there. I was 22 or 23. And I realized that no one had the stress of making a living, because we had the food, you were producing our food, the housing was there. There was no rent, there was food. And with both things were free. So that was very striking to me. We had time for making music, time to enjoy, to meet the others, to make dinners, no stress. If we had money, we would

buy some beers if we did not have any, we simply did not drink beers. So I realized, okay, that's it. If you give a house and a piece of land to everyone, if you give both you have freedom.” (Jorge, personal communication, April 16, 2021)

In the description of his own personal experiences of total freedom, it becomes clear that Jorge is convinced that people are only able to experience real freedom if they have their livelihood ensured. Jorge made another interesting point talking about basic needs. He stated that people are subjected to domination if their basic needs are not fulfilled:

“So, you know, when we are born and we are born into this kind of structure of property, where most of the people don't have access to a house, or a piece of land to cultivate or to make your own house. So that most of the population has to pay rent, doesn't have access to food or water, we don't have access to our natural rights. Then we are very exposed to domination.” (Jorge, personal communication, April 16, 2021)

This way of reasoning was not present in any of the other three interviews that expressed the satisfaction of basic needs as a prerequisite for freedom. However, Jorge was also the only one explaining the reasons for his concern more explicitly.

5.2.2 Freedom as equality

Another theme which was often addressed in the interviews was *equality*. Again, four out of five interviewees revealed that equality, in their opinion, is the basis of freedom. Interestingly, this theme was often linked with the previous one. A concern mentioned often within the interviews was the equal access to basic conditions of life. Jorge, for example, made it clear: „I think freedom is this possibility that should be universal to any human being to have access to the basic needs“ (Jorge, personal communication, April 16, 2021). One of the interviewees, namely Juan, showed an intensive preoccupation with equality in relation to freedom and mentioned it several times. For him, a society marked by inequality of income and wealth cannot be free:

“For me, freedom is not about my individual success. But this has to be a common thing. I cannot feel free in a society where I earn \$10,000 per month and my neighbors earn 200 or 500 per month, because for me freedom or has to do a lot with equality. A person that comes from a family that has no money and a person that comes from in a family with money, they have to have the same opportunities of making better for themselves. For example, a poor person has to have the same opportunity to access a health care system, and an educational system as well.” (Juan, personal communication, May 1, 2021)

Interestingly, Niklas seems to share this understanding of freedom. In the interview he referred to the moral reasoning device ‘veil of ignorance’ by the American philosopher John Rawls. According to Rawls (1999), understanding what justice requires, demands us to think about society from a position where we are covered in a ‘veil of ignorance’ about our social status and life conditions. Only from this ‘original position’, before any particular society exists, we

are able to judge how a just society could look like (Rawls, 1999). Niklas referenced to this way of reasoning in relation to freedom and stated that this idea influenced him particularly. It made him think that “freedom was then the thing for me that I imagined a kind of a physical and social space that everyone should have” (Niklas, personal communication, May 14, 2021). Christiane’s concern with equality is not as explicit. While she did not directly address the issue of equality, she did, however, report her reaction to her mother’s judgement of the former GDR as an unfree society:

“And she always painted the GDR as a horror. She said it would be so unfree, everyone would be so poor. I always said, "But everyone's the same there. That's something beautiful. And then she said, "Yes, everyone is equally poor. I just answered: "But they all have enough to eat, don't they?" Then my mother said, "Yes". And that was always the point where I thought, "That's funny, we can't find anything together here. For her it was unfree and for me it was just different.” (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021)

Her narration of this conversation with her mother shows that she disagrees with her that people cannot be free in a communist society. Here again, the connection between the two themes *equality* and *basic needs* appears. Having equally enough food to eat, seems to be crucial to Christine’s understanding of freedom.

5.2.3 Freedom as (limited) self-determination

Besides Niklas, all other four interviewees also mentioned *self-determination* as an important prerequisite for freedom. Interestingly, three of the four interviewees who mentioned this theme, revealed it right at the start of their discussion of freedom. It seems to have been the first thing that came to their mind thinking about freedom. Most explicitly it was mentioned by Graça, who stated that being free to her is “the possibility of achievement or realization on an individual and also collective level. It’s self-determination, and the possibility of choice based on our self-interests” (Graça, personal communication, May 14, 2021). Similarly, also Jorge expressed himself and started his discussion on freedom as follows: “It’s the possibility of a person to take decisions about his or her life that are the least conditioned by things that are external to their existence” (Jorge, personal communication, April 16, 2021). Both extracts out of Graça’s and Jorge’s interviews center around the idea, that freedom can only be achieved if a person is not constrained by external factors. Whilst Christine also mentions this idea of freedom, she furthermore acknowledges limits to self-determination:

“For me, being personally free means that I make my own decisions and that I determine what my life looks like and that I am not determined by others. And of course, as I just said, it can't be independent of others. I am always determined by others, because I am also dependent on others and others are dependent on me. But how can I organize a

society in such a way that within the framework it sets, and every freedom must have a framework, even if it is only the natural framework, I can really freely shape my own life within this framework. Within limits, but without limits there is no freedom.” (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021)

Accordingly, for Christiane, freedom can only exist in a given social framework. Whilst Juan is not as explicit about the limits of *self-determination*, he also acknowledges boundaries to it: “And for me, that's freedom, doing what I want without hurting anyone else, of course” (Juan, personal communication, May 1, 2021).

5.2.4 Freedom as the absence of societal forms of domination

Three of the five interviewees also mentioned that freedom, for them, is associated with the *absence of domination of social norms and structures*. Interestingly, Graça explicitly deals with the danger of racism and patriarchy in relation to freedom:

“But we can also have freedom, when we are free of domination mechanisms. We can be different, but the difference cannot be at the base of the inequality. I think, for example about racism here. We work in Coolabora a lot with Roma people and the difference is converting into inequality for them. And we cannot be free in patriarchal culture, because of the domination of women. If the message every day is to be subordinate this is not freedom.” (Graça, personal communication, May 14, 2021)

Her concern clearly comes from her day-to-day experience in her work with migrants and extremely poor people as well as her life experiences as a woman. However, also Niklas seems to have a similar understanding of the correlation between social norms and freedom. He is convinced that freedom can only occur if we have “less dominant norms in ways of living. If you think about living in heterosexual marriage, for example. Things like these are also putting high pressure on freedom” (Niklas, personal communication, May 14, 2021). While Jorge does not address clearly defined structural problems in Western societies, such as racism, gender inequality or societal norms in terms of sexuality, he seems to be concerned about norms of work and life plans in a capitalist society:

“Some of us are so much into one profession, so they do what they love. But that's not the majority of people. That's not what the people who work in the supermarket feel about their job. They are feeling empty. So why don't we follow our dreams? Or why don't we follow our curiosity? Why don't we try different things? Why are we afraid of risking? So freedom is not being afraid of risking. Like, I was an economist but now I want to be a carpenter. Can I try it? Or am I afraid that I will lose my job, that I will lose my capacity to pay my rent and then my children? That fear is constant. They want you to feel this fear to dominate you.” (Jorge, personal communication, April 16, 2021)

In this excerpt of the interview, it becomes clear that Jorge believes that people are not free in their life choices because of societal pressure to stick to norms related to work. Here we can

also see a link to the first theme, because being able to risk and break those norms, which Jorge's views as freedom, is only possible in a position where all your basic needs are fulfilled.

5.2.5 Freedom as political rights

Another prominent theme in three of the five interviews is freedom equated with *political rights*. Since political freedom is probably the most common association with the concept of freedom in democratic societies, it is surprising that not all five interviewees talked about political rights discussing the concept of freedom. However, as most of the participants never lived under anything but a democratic political system, it might well be the case that they simply take this kind of freedom for granted. At the end of the interview, Niklas even mentioned: "And also things like the freedom to speak out what I think. I probably take too many things for granted. For sure also the allowance and the actual possibility to co-shape society" (Niklas, personal communication, May 14, 2022). Similarly, Christiane mentioned democratic freedom to co-shape society only in a side sentence. Graça, on the contrary, referred to political freedom and rights several times within the discussion. The following quote from the interview explains why political freedom is so important to her:

"I think my teachers or my parents only told me about political freedom. And almost every year on the 25 of April. Only in these moments, we talked a little bit about freedom, but only in a very formal way. About the right to vote, the right to have an opinion. And I think it's absolutely important for our individual fulfillment." (Graça, personal communication, May 14, 2021)

In contrast to the other interviewees, Graça was born under the rule of a dictatorship. In Portugal the fascist Estado Novo ruled the country until a peaceful revolution on April 25, 1974. The memory of this time is still ingrained into public consciousness in Portugal and the Portuguese might not take political rights as much for granted as other European citizens.

5.2.6 Freedom as a social belonging

One last interesting theme that was mentioned by more than one interviewee was the role of community and *social belonging*. Jorge and Niklas share the idea that people can experience freedom through community support. Within his discussion of prerequisites of freedom, Jorge reveals the potential he sees in a strong community to provide freedom for its members:

"Yes, it's crucial to feel strong, to feel free. Because your network is your social capital. It's like that: I don't have money, but if I'm sick, or if I'm hungry, or if I need a place to sleep, I know I can count on people. And I can solve my problem." (Jorge, personal communication, April 16, 2021)

While for Jorge, a strong community network seems to be the best possible way to secure your basic needs and therefore your freedom, Niklas seems to focus more on an emotional freedom that for him goes hand in hand with the belonging to a social group. He is convinced that it is hard to feel free “as long as I'm not secure as I don't feel secure and accepted and as an accepted part of the society, and accepted from the people who are in my closest surrounding” (Niklas, personal communication, May 14, 202). While this subject might not be a strong pattern within this research it detects something that contradicts a predominant belief about freedom in western societies, namely that freedom is only about the individual.

5.2.7 Tensions with conventional conceptualizations of freedom

Apart from the discussion on prerequisites of freedom, the interviews also revealed another major topic. All five interviewees somehow mention *tensions with conventional conceptualizations of freedom*. Interestingly, the focus on individual freedom in Western society, which Jorge and Niklas already seemed to contradict with their discussions on social belonging and freedom, was also criticized more in detail. Jorge and Juan both explicitly rejected the idea that freedom has anything to do with individual fulfillment. This point of view is best illustrated by Juan's criticism on the way the Conservative Party in Spain reacted to the Covid-19 restrictions:

“So the main Conservative Party they are saying that our freedom is at risk. That is totally false, it is ridiculous. But if you think about it, they're trying to argue that the concept of freedom has to do with going out and having a drink and partying until 11. That's our freedom, the Madrilenian way of life. That's what they were saying a couple of days ago. But for me it's sort of ridiculous. Freedom is no concept where you have to think about yourself going to party or going to work and have a good job and all these things.” (Juan, personal communication, May 1, 2021)

His quote shows that Juan clearly seems to view the concept of freedom as independent of egoistic thinking. His vehement critique even conveys that he believes it to be absurd that being free relates to superficial individualistic enjoyments. Another criticism of conventional ideas related to freedom was expressed by Niklas. He seems to reject the idea, that freedom is about having chances and possibilities in life:

“So what I've been told, freedom to be, is then to have these chances, to have possibilities in life. That's what I've been told freedom is. And I've also acted to it in a way because I recognized that, of course, higher education opens possibilities, but also deciding on things opens possibilities. Deciding on okay, I'm going to study chemistry opens up possibilities for further education rather than not deciding on anything. So I lived to it quite a long time. Maybe until two or three years ago. And the concept of inner freedom is rather young for me. But now it plays such an important role for myself also. Before I just took this outer freedom, what I described first it as thing to do. But my inner state of

mind and being, I took them for granted. Just like waves that come and go.” (Niklas, personal communication, May 14, 202).

As this quote illustrates, Niklas believed for a long time that freedom is related to having more and more possibilities, just because he was told so. However, recently he seems to have come to the understanding that this is not true for him. In this part of the interview he described his path towards a different understanding of freedom, which is much more linked to a calm emotional state of mind, an ‘inner freedom’. Another interesting point, that revealed itself in the interview with Christiane was her disagreement with the idea that free market capitalism leads to freedom. Asking about her opinion about the role of freedom in free market capitalism she replied:

“Oh, the free market, I've never associated it with freedom, the free market. It has the word free in it, but the free market is basically a fantasy, because there are always regulations. It is never completely free. And if it were completely free, then the law of the strongest would apply. Yes, well, it's called free, but I've never associated that with freedom” (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021)

It's interesting, that the idea that free market capitalism could constitute a path towards individual freedom seems to be absurd to her. In addition, Christiane as well as Graça mentioned during the interviews that they do not regard the societies they live in to be free. Graça's answer to the question, if she could describe a moment in which she felt free, reveals that she can only feel free outside societal structures of the contemporary world:

“I think I feel really free when I walk in the mountains. I love to walk in the mountains. I don't know very well how to explain it, but maybe it's because I feel more aware of who I am, and more aware of the potential of life. But I don't know how to explain it. Maybe the immensity of the mountains. These structures of domination that are in our day to day life seem not relevant anymore then.” (Graça, personal communication, May 14, 2021)

While one has to read between the lines to understand that Graça's description of feeling free contradicts the common belief in our society to be free, Christiane's point of view is much more straightforward:

“Freedom is a bit abstract for me, because as long as we live in this society where it's not even clear whether our children will survive reasonably, freedom is somehow something that doesn't even appear on the horizon. (...) “Yes free, what is free? Well, I don't know if I've ever felt free. Can we feel free at all in this society? I don't know.” (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021)

Christiane's criticism on freedom pairs here very much with her criticism on the capitalist, growth-oriented system. In a world, where the survival of the next generation is not secured, for her, freedom is impossible.

5.2.8 Summary and conclusion

These previous sections have provided an understanding of what the semi-structured interviews with the five degrowth activists revealed about their conceptualization of freedom. It became clear that their discussions on freedom show circle around themes of *basic needs, equality and (limited) self-determination*. Whilst the themes *absence of domination of social norms and structures, political rights* and *social belonging* received comparably less attention by less interviewees, they still revealed interesting additional insights in how the activists conceptualize freedom. And finally, the way the five interviewees answered questions regarding their socialization and freedom revealed strong *tensions with conventional conceptualizations of freedom*.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The two objectives of the empirical research were first, to grasp the interviewees' relationship with the degrowth movement and secondly, to understand their conception of freedom. Regarding the first objective, the empirical research revealed that, whilst the degree to which the interviewees were involved with the degrowth movement differed considerably, their world views seemed to reverberate in the concept of degrowth. All of them expressed general support for the principles of the academic movement. Sorely one interviewee mentioned criticism on the movements' bourgeois nature, but clarified that he nevertheless supports the principles of the movement. In addition, all reasons for their support of degrowth ideas that were mentioned in the interviews related strongly to the arguments put forward by the degrowth movement itself. Thus, the first part of the analysis clearly revealed that the interviewees can be considered as ideologically aligned with degrowth principles. The second, more extensive part of the empirical research, which aimed at understanding the interviewees conception of freedom, deserves much more attention in this discussion. The findings of this part of the empirical research will now be compared to the theoretical hypothesis derived from the academic literature on conceptions of freedom presented in chapter 3. Let's remind ourselves: The theoretical discussion revealed that degrowth scenarios are most likely not compatible with the two ways of thinking about freedom predominant in Western democratic societies, namely *freedom as non-limitation* and *freedom as non-interference*. On the contrary however, a third conception, namely *freedom as non-domination*, seems to support degrowth principles. The following discussion about the findings of the empirical research will reveal to which extend these theoretical assumptions manifested themselves in the interviews.

Freedom as non-limitation, as explained before, relates to the idea that the bigger the number of options available to the individual, the freer he or she is (Pettit, 2003). This conception of freedom was not very noticeable in the interviews. To be more precise, only one interviewee explicitly mentioned the theme at all. Discussing his path towards his contemporary understanding of freedom, Niklas mentioned that he was always told that more chance and possibilities in life would enhance his freedom. But as discussed above, he recently came to reject this conception of freedom. Reading between the lines of Juan's critique on the conception of freedom of the Conservative Party, signals a similar assessment of this conception of freedom. Being free to party and drink, thus, being able to consume, is a 'ridiculous' way to conceptualize freedom for Juan. Thus, freedom as non-limitation seem to be a conception of freedom that he does not agree with. Within the course of the interview with Christiane the researcher asked a question regarding economic freedom. To be reminded, economic freedom in a free market, in which consumers can exchange goods completely voluntarily is often considered a prerequisite to political freedom (Friedman, 1982). However, Christiane clearly rejected the idea that economic freedom has anything to do with her concept of freedom. Accordingly, freedom as non-limitation seemed to be either simply not important to the interviewees' conception of freedom or they even strongly rejected it. Thus, these findings suggest that people who defend degrowth principles are not likely to conceptualize freedom as non-limitation.

Whereas this finding fits perfectly to the established hypothesis that people who support degrowth principles might not defend conventional conceptualizations of freedom, *freedom as non-interferences* was, surprisingly, part of the interviewees' general conception of freedom. To be reminded, freedom of non-interference roots in the liberal tradition and states that any kind of interference of one person with the wishes and acts of another is a hindrance to freedom (Berlin, 1969). As dwelled upon in chapter 5 the topic *freedom as self-determination* was present in four of the five interviews. It is also an interesting fact that most of the interviewees who mentioned this theme, referred to it right at the beginning of their comments on what freedom meant to them. It seems as if the liberal idea of freedom, that no one should interfere with your individual actions, is the first and most important condition for freedom for at least three of the five interviewees. However, two interviewees also mentioned limits to this explanation of freedom, since freedom can "never exist in a vacuum" (Christiane, translated personal communication, May 28, 2021). But, as mentioned in chapter 3, liberal thinkers do agree with the idea that some laws are required in order to curtail individual freedom to some extent, because a state of 'natural' freedom would lead to social chaos (Berlin, 1969). Thus,

mentioning limits to self-determination does not necessarily mean that those two interviewees reject the idea of freedom as non-interference as a whole. Nevertheless, the research revealed another subject in the interviews that does contradict the idea of freedom as non-interference. Four out of five interviewees discussed *equality* as an important prerequisite for freedom. Especially Juan made clear that freedom to him, is impossible in a world with an unequal distribution of income and wealth. However, freedom as non-interference as a concept only considers the action or inaction of other individuals, but not social processes, as hindrances to freedom. Accordingly, the unequal distribution of wealth and income, which results from free market capitalism, is not considered a restriction to personal freedom (Hayek, 2011). For four out of five interviewees, however, inequality, which results out of societal processes, does constrain freedom. Thus, whereas most of the degrowth activists interviewed for this research, might agree that self-determination is important for freedom, they seem to have a more complex concept of freedom.

In contrast, conceptualizing *freedom as non-domination* seems to relate much better to the way the five interviewees conceptualized freedom. To be reminded, the concept holds that a person is only free if he or she is not dominated by the possible, arbitrary interference of someone else, but able to act out of his or her own will and right (Pettit, 1997). Interestingly, implications of domination mechanisms were explicitly mentioned several times in the interviews. Three of the interviewees referred to the theme *absence of societal forms of domination*. Graça, for example, mentioned that patriarchal and racist structures in contemporary society often oppress women and migrants. In addition, societal norms in relation to sexuality and work were mentioned by Niklas and Jorge as restrictions to freedom. While this theme was not frequently addressed in the interviews, many other themes that were detected in the interviews can also be related to the conceptualization of freedom as non-domination. First of all, having *political rights* was mentioned in three interviews as a prerequisite for freedom. As stated in chapter 3, a democratic form of societal organization matches perfectly with the conception of freedom as non-domination, since domination can be avoided by active consent (Pettit, 1997). In a democratic society, where people have political rights and are able to co-shape society, domination is less likely. However, also this theme did not appear frequently during the interviews. Nevertheless, the themes that were most prominent during the interviews, namely *equality* and *the fulfillment of basic needs* relate to the conception of freedom as non-domination as well. In an equal society where each and everyone's basic conditions of life are fulfilled, people are freed from the kind of domination that results from the current socio-economic conditions created by market-capitalism. For most of the

interviewees, not having to worry about one's own survival is the most important condition for individual and collective freedom. And especially the provision of security in terms of food and shelter can take away much of the domination that people could experience in a capitalist system. If the basic conditions of life are insured, people can freely decide if they want to be a carpenter, an actress, a painter or whatever they might want to be. They would not be dominated by money concerns anymore. As two of the interviewees also mentioned, these basic needs do not necessarily have to be provided by the state, but can just as well be ensured by belonging to a community. Thus, another prerequisite for freedom, which was important to two of the interviewees, namely *social belonging*, can also be related to conceptualizing freedom as non-domination. Belonging to a community can free people from the domination of market mechanisms, because social belonging can often provide food and shelter for the individual.

All in all, the empirical research has verified the two theoretical hypotheses about liberty and degrowth that had been postulated after the theoretical discussion, to a certain extent. The five interviewees, who clearly seem to align with degrowth values and support the movements principles, do not seem to conceptualize freedom as non-limitation at all. However, self-determination seems to play a crucial role for many of the interviewees. This indicates that the conceptualization of freedom as non-interference might constitute part of their understanding of freedom. Nevertheless, many of the detected topics in the interviews point to a more complex concept of freedom. Interestingly, many of the detected themes do indeed relate to the conceptualization of freedom as non-domination. Thus, the five interviewees rather seem to align with Pettit's and Skinner's conceptualization of freedom as non-domination, then with the conventional conceptions of freedom.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand how people's concepts of freedom could influence their attitudes towards degrowth principles. Degrowth implies the conscious rejection of the idea that economic growth is necessary for progress and development. It calls for a reduction of consumption and production in western economies and radical change in people's lifestyles. While in times of an environmental crisis, the idea of downscaling economic output should at least be discussed, degrowth is not given any attention in political debates or conventional media. There definitely exist various reasons why degrowth principles are not gaining popularity. But the role of conventional concepts of freedom in contemporary western societies, has been hardly researched at all. This research aimed at filling the gap. And it does indeed illustrate that the personal concept of freedom can be a determining factor for one's perception

of the degrowth movement and therefore implicitly constitute part of an explanation for the marginalization of degrowth. The research combined a theoretical analysis of degrowth principles in regard to concepts of freedom with a qualitative research of the perception of freedom of degrowth activists. The theoretical discussion revealed that degrowth principles are not compatible with conventional concepts of freedom in theory and the empirical research suggests a similar conclusion. The semi-structured interviews with the five interviewees revealed not only their support for degrowth principles but outlined their ideas about the nature of freedom. The conventional concept of freedom as non-limitation was either non-existent or clearly rejected in all five interviews. While freedom as non-interference, another conventional way of thinking of freedom, was, however, addressed by the interviewees, it became apparent that all of them conceptualized freedom in a more complex way. Actually most topics that emerged within the five interviews seemed to align with a concept of freedom, that is rather uncommon in modern capitalist societies, namely freedom as non-domination. Hence, for the five interviewees, being free is not tied to free markets, consumption or unlimited possibilities, but rather linked with equality, the fulfillment of their basic needs, the absence of oppressive structures, political rights and community belonging. All in all, the findings of this research suggest that there is an intrinsic correlation between the acceptance of degrowth principles and a conceptualization of freedom that goes beyond conventional concepts of liberty. Thus, coming back to the aim of this thesis, these findings suggest that conceptualizing freedom beyond the ruling concepts seem to favor support for degrowth principles.

However, as this research had a qualitative approach and the researcher did only interview five people about their relationship towards degrowth and their ideas on the nature of freedom, the reader needs to keep in mind that these findings cannot be generalized. Thus, this research does not assert, that everyone who supports degrowth principles has a complex understanding of freedom which relates to the concept of freedom as non-domination. While it does not claim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between degrowth and freedom, it does, nevertheless provide a reasonable starting point for further research on the topic. And indeed, further debate and research seems necessary in order to elaborate and strengthen the understanding of the correlation between freedom and the paradigm of economic growth as well as degrowth principles, if we want to tackle the environmental crisis efficiently.

People have different beliefs about what is needed to solve the environmental crisis. While Bill Gates understands progress as continuous economic growth on the basis of technological innovation, Pope Francis demands radical change in people's lifestyles and a downscaling of the economy. But the point is that Gates' view dominates the world, whereas Pope

Francis' perspective finds little attention, neither in political arenas nor among the general public. However, if we want to address the environmental crisis, we need to open a discussion on alternatives to ever-lasting growth through technological innovation. And with this, I do not suggest that degrowth is the solution to all our problems, but that discussion beyond growth is absolutely necessary. What this research has shown, is that it is likely that the way people conceptualize freedom might influence their willingness to enter in such a discussion. We all seem to share the belief that freedom, in whatever form, is the most central value to human well-being and happiness. If, however, our understanding of freedom is sorely linked to unlimited options and unhindered self-determination, it is difficult to enter in a discussion about ecological limits and abstention. Looking at my research from this perspective, it can be understood as a call for a public debate about the nature of freedom for a more sustainable scenario of the future of Europe.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Degrowth and the Meaning of Freedom

Semi-structured interview design

By Laura Carlotta Terhorst (MA. International Studies, University Institute of Lisbon)

I. Introduction

Thank you for participating in my research. This is an interview with the purpose to collect information and research to be used, and only, in a Master Dissertation (Msc. International Studies) at Iscte. If you agree to be interviewed, please fill out the consent form and we can start the interview.

I would like to talk to you about your activism and its relation to degrowth as well as your perception of freedom and liberty. I'm mostly interested in how you personally perceive and experience degrowth as a movement and your own, individual ideas on what it means to be free, regardless of your knowledge of scientific definitions. I am going to break this interview into three parts. First of all, I would like to get to know more about your personal background, then we will talk about your relation to the degrowth movement and finally I would like to learn about your perception of freedom.

II. Personal background

First of all, I would like you to tell me a little bit about yourself, your education and your job.

1. Where did you grow up?
2. What is your highest educational degree?
3. What is your job?

III. Degrowth activism

Now, I would like to talk to you about the degrowth movement and your relation to it.

1. When did you first learn about the degrowth movement? Do you remember what you were thinking after your first encounter with degrowth ideas? (probe for inspiration or discontent)
2. How would a society look like which is organized after degrowth principles? Would you describe its main characteristics to me? (probe for economic system, work environment, democratic system etc.)
3. Tell me a little bit about your organization, the way you live and the activities you take part in which you would describe as degrowth activism? (adjust question to the kind of activism the participant is involved in)
4. Why do you believe societies should be organized according to degrowth principles? (probe for typical degrowth arguments: ecological limits, improvement of well-being etc.)

IV. Perception of freedom

Now in this last part I would like to learn more about your understanding of liberty.

1. Let's start with a general question: What does being free mean for you personally?
2. How were you raised to think about freedom? What would your family or teachers tell you as a kind about the meaning of freedom? And how did you react to it? (probe for different conceptions of freedom here; and in which way they were received by the participant)
3. Can you describe a moment in your life in which you felt really free? Do you remember what made you feel free?
4. What are prerequisites for freedom for you? What do you think people need to be free? (probe for 'non-limitation', 'non-interference', 'non-domination')

Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix B: Interview Transcripts

1. Interview transcript - Jorge - April 16th 2021

00:00

C: Is it okay for you to record this interview?

00:04

J: Yes.

00:06

C: Perfect thank you. I would like to talk to you about your personal background, your activism and your idea of freedom. I already explained that we will do the interview in three parts. Just to remind you, I don't really want to know anything about definitions that you know about freedom or your scientific knowledge about it, but more about your personal ideas. So, I'm not looking for concepts. Okay, then let's start with your personal background. And maybe you can tell me a bit about yourself, your education and your job. So where did you grow up? And yeah, how did it come you ended up here?

00:47

J: I grew up in Coimbra. Then I studied my bachelor in Lisbon at NOVA, in Economics in a very neoliberal University. Then I finished university and then I went to Indonesia and to Thailand. I worked in microfinance and rural development, permaculture, public health it was back in 2006/2007. I stayed there two years, and then I moved to Berlin. I stay there for five years, I have a master's in development economics and a PhD in economics at the TU Universität Berlin, in innovation economics. When I was in Berlin, I was part of a collective called 'Altes Finanzamt'. It's an artistic collective that we started in 2010, when I was there and it still exists in Neukölln. But in my academic work I focused on methodologies of development, economic methodologies of impact assessment and epistemology. I came with some practical experience from India. And then I arrived in Europe. And I understood where I was born: a very limited place. You be can open but terrible. Economics in Europe is very one sided, very ethnocentric, very limited, very oppressive for the Europeans themselves. So when I came back, I had this shock. And I wrote a lot about methodology of development economics, criticizing the way development economics is done. And then I moved to Portugal in 2013, when I finished my part in the collective project and my PhD. I moved here and after two years, we created this initiative, because I came to understand what was needed. Then we understood that it was a cooperative and that we could design it like this. Because, and this is also my method, first you understand the problems and then you develop solutions. You don't come with solutions. And then that was it. We were here, we develop, we thought about what was needed and we ended up with Minga. We created it in 2015.

03:27

C: And now you're only working for the cooperative or are you also working as a researcher?

03:34

J: Yeah. I don't work so much for the comparative. I mean, I'm currently the president, which means I don't have to do much (laughs). No, no we don't take much decisions. We will talk about it but the members have their own projects, we don't have to decide on the project. I'm a researcher in the University of Coimbra in the center of functional ecology, although I'm not conducting research right now. I am waiting for a project application at the moment. And I'm

giving some classes in universities sometimes. And I'm the treasurer of wind empowerment, which is a worldwide NGO from England. I'm in the board. And I do consultancy for projects in Portugal that want to create their cooperative or creative projects. I give them support. And I'm helping a lot of cooperatives around and other projects.

04:43

C: Are there more cooperatives in Portugal? I know I at least two on the Degrowth map. Minga and Coolabora.

05:01

J: Yes, I know them. I give consultancy to them. Yeah, there are many cooperatives appearing, more or less with our model. I mean, it's not necessarily our model, the law is there, you can do this kind of stuff. So yeah. There are many appearing in the last years.

05:55

C. Now, I want to know a bit more about your relation to the degrowth movement, because I'm writing, especially on the degrowth movement. I saw that your cooperative is also part of the degrowth network, at least it's on the map on degrowth.org.

06:13

J: I didn't know this even existed. But now I know.

06:20

C: But I guess you are kind of related to it, right?

06:21

J: Yes. So basically when I was still in Berlin in 2012 I was invited to be a part of "Growl - grow less learn more". It's a European network for teaching degrowth. And by then I was living there, but you were already planning to move to Portugal. And then, through ISCTE we formally engaged as a Portuguese partner for that network. So between 2013 and 2015, there were courses in different countries, about different topics. We were the last one. It was about the degrowth public policies, we have also a paper on that. And when we did it here, we did the degrowth caravan. So I was a member of that movement at that time. I mean, we were connected with the guys from the Universidad Autonoma of Barcelona. By that time, those were the degrowth movements that existed in Europe, we were all in that network, or most of them. So yeah, it was also during the time that we were creating Minga. "Minga" means the degrowing in Portuguese. So yeah, we started that, let's say connected to the degrowth movement and its ideas. But with time we are not so much evolved anymore .

08:37

C: So if I understand you correctly, your own idea came from there, but today you're maybe not that connected to degrowth anymore.

08:45

J: Yeah, I like the concept of degrowth. Although, I have come to doubt many things in that movement, but I like the concept, and we like the concept. So we thought it to be a nice way to put it. To question things. And that was a bit of inspiration. To put a question: What is the importance of degrowth? And especially in 2015 there wasn't much discussion about it yet, I mean even today there isn't much. So as a concept it is not so much explored.

09:29

C: So do you remember the first time you've heard about this idea of degrowth and how you reacted to it? Did you directly think that it's actually a good idea or what did you think?

09:40

J: I don't remember exactly. I can imagine it was around 2011 or 2012. I guess it was because I was invited for these networks. I'm not sure. But I connected directly because I studied indicators and the GDP and all these things. So, for me, it was very obvious that there was a problem with indicators in general to compare societies. I don't remember, but I can imagine I reacted good.

10:46

C: And when you would describe a society that is built on degrowth principles, how would you describe that?

10:55

I think for me the most important thing about degrowth is the one topic that most of the people from the degrowth movement don't really like to talk. It is demographics. Most of the people that are into degrowth are urban people, and I've been an urban person. I mean, I'm still originally an urban person. I think we have to distribute the people in the territory better. It is important in territories with lower densities to help the cooperation and relationships, to repeat the relationships with the people, that means to call for cooperation and solidarity. And it also allows you to have access to resources whereas in the city you never have that, unless you're rich. And with resources I mean land, house, water. The idea for me have a degrowth and that's I think the strength, is this approach of reducing the densities of communities so that people can actually know each other. And then the things emerge through relationships not through, and that's the problem of degrowth as well, not through ideology. Relationships are the true bottom up initiatives that people throughout communication that evolved throughout collaboration or shared needs.

12:47

C: Can you tell me a bit more about your cooperative Minga and how it how it came into place? What your basic ideas and principles are, and how it works?

13:01

J: Yeah. So we organized a lot of stuff between 2013 and 2015. Like talks, reflections, working groups. But the most important one was in December 2014. We were very sure that we wanted to make a cooperative, but we didn't know how comparatives work. So we organized something called the "forum of cooperatives" at Monte-Mor. And we invited the local cooperative, we invited other cooperatives, and we tried to have people from the community. And we had them there. I mean, I was already for two years, and knew some people. So the people came and it was good for us to first to see what the movements in Europe were and also what were the possibilities of organizing comparatives, like technically. And then on the other side, what are the needs of people? So that was the focus of the day. By then we were working with farmers, a bit with artisans. And we realized that farmers, artisans and services providers had a problem with invoicing their products, and open a proper company. It's expansive. They have to pay their account and they have don't have social security. They don't know anything about taxes, they can make mistakes. And then there were no shops selling local products. So there were major difficulties to create a local company. It's very expensive. So people don't do small businesses, but they also can't work for others. And on the other side, it is also difficult to sell the product. It was in 2015, there was still a big crisis happening here. In 2013/14 was the peak of emigration and the peak of unemployment, a lot of

people were leaving this area. So we thought about creating something that would go in the direction of avoiding that, to create an alternative and respond to the concrete problems of people. So, then we created a cooperative after several months, we studied with Institutes and other graduates and we try to make it as broad as possible so that you could do any sort of activity, economic or cultural or housing, you can do it legally through the cooperative. And so basically, all the members of the cooperative can sell products, farming or non-farming, artists products or clothes. They can sell any sort of product, they can sell any kind of service, legally and empowered by our systems. And they can also do any sort of housing projects. And basically, we have bureaucratic machine that has an accountant, that has a person that takes care of bills and someone that deals with tax. And everyone from Monte-Mor can meet us. Maybe he needs to start the company. Then he can just come and say “Okay, I want to sell soaps, I want to sell vegetables, I want to sell clothes, or whatever, to a shop or in your shop. He can also say “I want to go to a market fair somewhere”. And look at it and see if has a cost or no cost. As long as it's legal people can do whatever they want to. Our task is just to open possibilities for legal actions, and the people themselves have their project, so I don't touch anyone's project. The projects are autonomous. I don't say anything to anyone, unless you are violating anything specific. We don't say anything to the people. So we have a very decentralized project, very non-ideological. In the way it is constructed it is a bureaucratic machine. It's quite efficient in that sense. We always have a huge invoice and we spend 600 Euros per month. So we are invoicing let's say 50,000 per month. So, 5% of the invoicing stays with the cooperative. That's how it works. Okay, in the beginning it was eight, there were no quota, there were no monthly payments. Because we didn't want to put people away. No one was trusting cooperatives in 2015, it was a completely new thing. And for sure not in a rural place. It was not known here.

With all the migration and unemployment, it took some time to get the trust. So definitely not asking a monthly payment was needed. We were a bit stressed, because of that, because we were very small. And then with time, we reduced from eight to five. Now we reduce to four if you invoice more than 20,000 in a year and then if your invoice is more than 80,000 we reduce to 3%. So we are always trying to create collective means, the more we are the cheaper it is for each to keep the life. And we want to keep it that way, we have extremely low costs. The shop is included, when I say 600 I'm not talking about the shop because the shop is its own. In the beginning the shop was part of the whole thing, but now we have a very nice team there. They're doing a great job since last year. For one year now. And we gave them autonomy and they are managing themselves. That was always the opportunity. But in the beginning I was doing pretty much everything. I was the treasurer, the shop guy, communication, the website, Facebook. But now we have different gangs. Okay, good. Perfect. It's a model that is very up to bureaucracy, creating structure that is available to any member of our society in this municipality and so that they can use it. We try to help. And eventually people start collaborating. We have also tried to promote some collaboration and supply, for example we cater to school canteens, we have some farmers in the shop.

20:10

C: And do you have the feeling that the people here in town are willing to take part and are using the opportunities of the cooperative?

20:21

J: Yeah, in a way. The shop for sure. Many clients are the neighbors and the people that know us. We give a service to the community. I mean, we give money. We organize income. So when you put money in the pockets of the people, people normally like it. So I mean, not me personally, but the cooperative. So we have the canteens and we have the shop, we sell quite a bit and we have a market thing. And we could sell more, if we want and if there is production.

There isn't so much local vegetables for example. So I feel that more and more people come to us, especially farmers. The other people come for buying stuff definitely. To create businesses some people do, but some people still prefer to create their own companies. I mean, I'm talking about the local population. From the people that are moving to Monte-Mor, most of them just do the invoicing through the cooperative and that's it. Farmers are all local people, older people.

21:55

C: And do you sell their products in the shop?

22:59

J: Yes, we sell them in the shop. We sell not only vegetables, but cosmetics, meat from local producers. Some things are from outside, things that we don't produce here or not yet. But it's like really 90% of the products. Yeah, so more and more is happening, but there isn't so much young people anymore, so it's not so easy. But people trust us. In a way I feel that more and more trust from the people and more and more people from different areas come. I mean, it's existing for some years now. People start trusting more, and we are very connected in different ways with the local people. We sing, the local tradition is singing. And other things. I mean, I'm not in a bubble, I mean, I spend my time in the local way because I know the people. I came here not to be urban people, I came here to be with people from here. This is my personal perspective. My daily life is with the people from here. So I think gradually, they take it more and more seriously. They see more and more of the opportunity like plumbers, we have already from here, but apart from farmers, construction workers, gardeners. Yeah, but we have a very good relationship.

24:04

C: So as I understand that was also part of your goal, right? To include the whole rural population?

24:12

J: The goal was to offer a solution. If people use it or not, that's another question. And then, of course, they will use it more the better we design it. I think gradually, people have started to trust in a deeper level and proceeding to understand that they can use it more and more.

24:39

C: And do personally think that this kind of initiatives, like yours, are opening possibilities for other rural areas? I read that Portugal, like many countries, has a problem with rural depopulation? Do you think this a way toward building a future for many rural towns?

25:13

J: I normally say corporations are more important than cooperatives. Each context is a different context. When I start, for example, working with a group, I don't start by telling them they have to create a cooperative similar to ours. Many times I say, don't make the cooperative, I say "Do other things!". An association or a company! Because, you know, if you arrive in a place, you're not from there, or you do not have many people around you do not start a cooperative. You eventually start small projects of collaboration. That may evolve in a comparative. I think everything starts with a problem. And the problem always starts with people that signify that problem, that perceived or construct that problem. In Portuguese legislation, the cooperative structure it extremely adaptable, flexible and cheap structure to address a lot of problems, namely productive economic problems, formalization of economic activity, and housing. These are the two main for me, roles of cooperatives.

Many people think because Minga became so big, they should do this, too. But for me it is only one piece in the path towards solidarity economics. Imagine a path with a lot of holes, Minga fills that hole, that hole and that hole, but it will never fill this hole and this one. It can be an association, it could be a political party or a citizen movement for the election, or an environmental association, a cultural association, a currency association. We have created a currency association here in Monte-Mor, we are creating a local currency here. So first, you need to identify the holes and then you need to identify how you are going to dress it, according to your social structure, according to your individual and social needs, and according to the legal structure of a country, and in our case, we have a very good law on for cooperatives. So I think, for many, many problems, you can use cooperatives to solve. So definitely it is not necessarily the only model but the model of cooperatives can be a good legal structure to deal with local problems.

28:16

C: And then I have one question left that goes back to the degrowth idea. What do you think, why should society be more organized around degrowth principles? Not necessarily maybe only the around the academic degrowth ideas, but in a more broad sense. Why should we degrowth our economy?

29:02

J: I'm not a degrowth fundamentalist. Actually I was always on the border. I think one thing: They are reducing complexity, through an indicator in order to impose an agenda, that's obvious. So degrowth is the questioning of the usage of the measurement indicator, and its evolution as a reflection of our social goals. So any questioning of that indicator, or off that social goal is very important, so that we open our minds and question deeper what is around us and what we really want for us or for our communities. So degrowth can fill that task of questioning a structure and that part of the dominations of the neoliberal agenda. But I have a problem with the degrowth movement. I mean, I was younger, so I maybe I was not expecting as much but then I got used to these things. So, now I'm very disturbed when people use the word questioning, which is a nice word. But they tend to give heterogenic solutions, instead of just letting the deconstruction to us and let emerge various solutions. And even if they say something says about this, the degrowth movement are all academic people and urban people, so they are bourgeoisie people, high class people, traveling the world. And they don't understand the world because they never lived outside the university. Most of them. They never had the profession in their life. They've never had business in their life. They have no clue about the real people's lives. Their parents are doctors. My father is a doctor, I'm talking about my social class. And if we don't go out of his bubble, that's a real bubble. And that's the problem of degrowth. It ended up in trying to universalize solutions. When they talk about basic income, they have no clue what they're what they're talking about. I'm invited sometimes to talk about launches of books of degrowth and the idea of basic income is always coming. But it is very easy to deconstruct into even a degrowth perspective, why basic income is not degrowth for half a second of our existence. It's capitalism in its deepest state. So I think degrowth entered into what is expected from Europeans. That is ethnocentrism, moralism and bourgeois thinking. So instead of going to work with the communities, leaving our comfortable universities, let's deal with the problem. Let's ask the people what's the problem and then let's put our knowledge to try to solve them. That's why I talk about methodology. And it's why for me this is always important to apply my knowledge or our knowledge to solve the concrete problem of the people. We stay in our departments in universities, reading and writing other to bourgeoisie people, instead doing something. Things always have to emerge from action, this idea also comes from other really good economists. And even within solidarity economics in Brazil, Latin countries try to grow from bottom up. But no, what we spend our time in degrowth movement right now

is discussing basic income and no globalist perspectives. So they completely miss the point. They don't understand even where it starts, it starts from need, it start from deconstructing global solutions. And starting from concrete problems for which then emerge solutions. That's what degrowth actually says in the beginning. That's what permaculture says in the beginning.

33:48

C: So as I understood you now, you think that the degrowth idea initially was good, but it's too far removed from local realities now, right?

34:02

J: Yes. I'm very open. I'm with everyone. You know, people listen to me sometimes and sometimes not. I say I don't want to put bother because that's too much, you need to be polite and everything should be equalized. Not only for us. Degrowth fails completely inside the discourse of Co2 emissions. I was discussing a lot in 2013/14. I was like, guys, this is bullshit capitalism. That's not the environment, the environment is not Co2. That's, that's the business they're doing. And it's just strategic, and they cheat every day. Climate change, global warming, like sorry no, really. Sorry. It's bourgeois thinking. They do not have a critical perspective. So I even think even deeper, I think we, and I say 'we' because I was part of, this movement, we were dominated by the current system by the capitalist system from the beginning, from the very beginning to bring the great reset. The World Economic Forum, came with the concept of great reset, because of the pandemic and because of climate change, which now as the pandemic fades out in media, climate change propaganda will rise again. Because of these two topics, the World Economic Forum decided to propose the 'Great Reset'. And it just says that we should accept that nothing will be yours, accept that you will be poor forever, accept poverty, but it's not voluntary simplicity like degrowth: It says poverty is normal. And so with "Great Reset" that, they are making our simple, voluntary simplicity into the cool thing. And of course, the bourgeoisie with our good salaries and our things, we also like lockdown, because our salary stays. Because we don't have a cafe and we don't know they suffer. That's why all the bourgeoisie in the universities like the lockdown and all these things. And then they put these things. The basic social income is part of poverty, it enforces poverty. It's about not being empowered by your autonomy and self-organization, collective self-organization, it's in fact destroying self-organization, by making everyone depended on an income that comes from a central government. So instead of developing solidarity based relationships, where we need each other to solve our individual problems, and find collaborative solutions, we are becoming even more individualistic, because we only depend from a transfer from the rich. So that's the great problem of the basic income. It's very similar to any subsidy to the poor people. Because it's not structurally solving the issue, it's not telling you, let's do the right to housing, and implement the right to housing. No, it gives you money, and you pay to the landlord. So I give you 500 per month, and I give to everyone in Portugal, 500 per month, how much will the rent increase? 500 per month? So it's a treasure to whom? For the people or for the landlords? And when you think about that, and if you look to everything from the land use to the subsidies from European Union to farmers, everything is based on this principle, you tax the poor, you subsidize the rich, it's everything designed like this. And everything they give to us as a good thing. There's always a hidden side, that you only can see if you are constantly practicing critical thinking which degrowth brings a lot through educational principles to changing the educational system. But we were built in the current educational system so we cannot jump. And because what is it what we want? Yeah, I mean, the ideal is to solve everyone's problems. They say, we should have a Minga everywhere in the world. But no! But its not like that. Think for yourself, think what do you need! I know so many people that started cooperatives and that created problems for themselves, for the people they work with, because they don't have the basis to create a cooperative. They don't have enough people ,they don't have the knowledge nor the money.

They want to change the world. Good. But we are bringing something, a premade solution and the person just says “I what that” but it's not what he needs. So first thing you need to do is to ask yourself “what do you need”? And what are your resources and who is around you? So I liked the concept, I think it's a good concept. But I think we are lacking a bit, and this is very important, structural critical thinking, and very crucial action research approach, like you research but you need to practice, you research a technique of how to produce better trees, you need to go and plant them and see if it works. You want to organize a fair with a local currency, I did it here three times. Now we have a currency association. You try it somethings it work, somethings didn't work. Good, Let's go for further. And this is the I think, where we need to go and I mean, what I'm saying to you, I was I was saying already in 2014. I was writing about action research, other people are writing about that too, but it's actually action research in a very deep sense. It's like, it's action. It's like make a business, but whatever you decide, go to the end.

Normally people just stay six months while they are doing this research or while they are doing this part of their academic records, and then go away again. No, do the projects fail if it's meant to fail learn what you have to learn. See, fail learn proceed to experiment.

00:02

C: Okay, now to like to get to know more about your understanding of liberty and freedom. Let's just start with a general question: What do you think being free means for you personally?

00:26

J: It's the possibility of a person to take decisions about his or her life that are the least conditioned by things that are external to their existence. So, you know, when we are born and we are born into this kind of structure of property, where most of the people don't have access to a house, or a piece of land to cultivate or to make your own house. So that most of the population has to pay rent, doesn't have access to food or water, we don't have access to our natural rights. Then we are very exposed to domination. That means we are very exposed to the others using our time, our lifetime, instead of having it for yourselves to use that for us, to serve ourselves and our needs, individual or collective. Then they can use that time because we don't have the power, we have to pay a rent, we have to pay the food. So we have to work more hours and receive less money and accept working conditions that we normally would not accept. If we will have a house or the access to build our house or if you would have the access to have land. So I think freedom is this possibility that should be universal to any human being to have access to the basic needs. And that is access to land, water, and shelter. Everything else comes after: education. health services, education services, Social Security Services. It's a consequence of living in society, for example transmitting education, it's a part of living in society. We're always having new generations, so education and how we investigate about foods, about treatments. But first it needs to be that and that's why Minga exists. We started with a text that I wrote in 2011 or 2012. It was called the hetero-utopian society. It's a description of the society that is evermore condemned to the uniformization of the ways of living, of the standards and objectives of living. So we are making live about standards not about authenticity, not about originality, just about standards of life, repetition on group. No risk, no try, no curiosity and learn more things. So we need first to find what is conditioning the options of people and what is taking the freedom of people. Now, we are animals. So we have to do something in order to survive. The food should not arrive at our door, the ceiling that covers us should not arrive in our door. It has to happen somehow. So we need to work. And because we have access to resources, such as clay, water and land, we can transform these resources to satisfy our physical and natural needs. So, for me, freedom is the ability of acting without being conditioned by external conditions. Normally those conditions are social, because you are always conditioned by the availability of water and the natural resources. They are always limited in a way, they

are not but at least in the short run they are. So we have to manage how we are going to plant, for example, the pumpkin. Because, you have to know how many pumpkins you can produce, because places where it rains that much more on some places than others. So you are always conditioned by God, by nature but you should not be conditioned by the social nature of things. That cannot happen, or at least we have to fight for it.

06:08

C: Do you remember a certain moment in your life in which you understood what freedom means to you?

06:31

J: Yes, there was a very strong moment in my life. I mean, there are many moments about freedom. I mean, we have the revolution day in Portugal and all the history of the revolution. I'm very inspired by that. But there is a very precise moment in my life where I understood, that's why *Minga* exist in a way, I think. It was in 2007, when I was in Thailand. I was living on a the farm. And everyone that was in that farm, had the right either to put a tent or eventually built their own house. I was there some months, not for long, but it was so good to live there. I was 22 or 23. And I realized that no one had the stress of making a living, because we had the food, you were producing our food, the housing was there. There was no rent, there was food. And with both things were free. So that was very striking to me. We had time for making music, time to enjoy, to meet the others, to make dinners, no stress. If we had money, we would buy some beers if we did not have any, we simply did not drink beers. So I realized, okay, that's it. If you give a house and a piece of land to everyone, if you give both you have freedom. I saw it, was very obvious. Since then, I'm trying to do that. When I came to Portugal, to Monte-Mor, I came with the straight objective to create a housing project for the people. But we didn't manage to do it for many reasons. It's hard to have money to buy a piece of land and also the municipality was not interested in solving the problems of the people. But that was the main topic, right to housing, right to property, not property to be private property, but to be used by the people that need to use the property and the land. So yeah, since 2007, I understood what freedom is for me. Before maybe I was still finding what was freedom. I thought it could be about being different from each other, about being able to follow your curiosity. But I saw it there in Thailand. I saw it as an economic structure. This is needed, then people can do whatever they want, then they will collaborate because they have free time. Then they will learn a new instrument because they have free time. Now, I live on a farm, I don't have a rent and I don't have to pay electricity. I know they have to pay for food. So I know what that means. And I see my friends around that don't have the same luxurious perspective. They struggle. I don't have to struggle. When it's a new month, I don't have a rent to pay. I don't care if I don't have money. It's not doesn't make a difference. So domination exists through land and through property rights.

09:52

C: And do you remember how you were raised to think about freedom? Did your parents say something to you, that you remember, about what it means to be free? Or your old friends, if you ever talk with them about freedom, what do you think they would consider to freedom to be? Do you think freedom means something different to you then to the people around you?

10:27

J: No, no, we all come from a leftist background. I mean, don't even believe in left and right anymore. So we had a kind of free education in a way. Camping, traveling since very young. I think we have a very similar idea in general. And when I say these things that I just said to you, I get everyone, everyone connects to this, because I'm not saying you cannot have a lot of

property, you can have all the property in the world. But each one that is here as the minimum that he has to have. Even if the rest of the properties belongs to only one person, I don't care. I care if everyone has 50 square meters for housing, and another 50 for a vegetable garden. That's the basics, and water. So you don't need to fight the rich. You don't need to create enemies you don't to say private property is bad. We don't need to take the land of anyone, there is some trauma here in Portugal from the revolution about land, which was important to understand Portugal today. They gave land back to the rich people. We live in fascism. Portugal since the 25th of November 75, just came back to fascism. Now we live in the effect of that. Anyways, I think you can really connect with people on these ideas because you don't create enemies. That's actually another problem I have with degrowth and other urban movements: It is that they always create a barrier between people, between "we" and "them". They say "we" believe in ecology and "they" are bad, they don't believe it, "we" are against racism, "they" are bad because they are racist. There is always this opposition to divide us and to divide the academic world from the population, and there is a clash. So to overcome that we have to have a narrative that everyone understands and doesn't feel that there is a conflict. But something that is good for everyone, doesn't matter if you're a gipsy, poor or rich. It's the same for everyone, for your children, for your grandchildren, for everyone. And that's it. And I think that can connect the people easily. And I feel that when I talk about things with people. Discussing why to work, or why we work in the same job all our life. Some of us like that of cause. Some of us are so much into one profession, so they do what they love. But that's not the majority of people. That's not what the people who work in the supermarket feel about their job. They are feeling empty. So why don't we follow our dreams? Or why don't we follow our curiosity? Why don't we try different things? Why are we afraid of risking? So freedom is not being afraid of risking. Like, I was an economist but now I want to be a carpenter. Can I try it? Or am I afraid that I will lose my job, that I will lose my capacity to pay my rent and then my children? That fear is constant. They want you to feel this fear to dominate you.

Especially if you have kids, in the beginning of the month there must be house. How can you do? It's the basics, when you have a kid. You have to have a house. The boss can tell you work the weekends. And then the boss tells I really need to cut the salary and then the boss says take that chemicals and don't use the mask because I don't have money to pay your equipment. And you do it. And the more slave you are in the society, the more you have to accept it. Just to have the basics. So this ability of risking is it's a luxurious thing. I can risk because you have a land and I know I'm not starving. Even today I was with a friend. He was feeling not very good emotionally, because he was concerned about the future. I mean, everyone deals with that every day, the more you are exposed to people the more you see that. So they are afraid of the future, because you don't have anything, they don't have any basis. If the money stops falling on that day, what you do? And then we are here we are collaborating with each other, we know each other, but I imagine if you are in a city it's different. How will we solve your problem? Sometimes you need a job, we find each other we get the job, because there is a network. But if you are not in a network, because society is not working as a network, how to solve the problem? So then you don't risk and then you accept your boss and you accept all the oppression that exists.

16:13

C: So as I understand you, a social network could be a prerequisite for freedom for you? And what else do people in your opinion need to be free?

16:19

J: Yes, it's crucial to feel strong, to feel free. Because your network is your social capital. It's like, I don't have money. But if I'm sick, or if I'm hungry, or if I need a place to sleep, I know I can count on people. And I can solve my problem. Because we are so individualistic in the

way we are educated. Each one is doing their own thing so that you don't have an exchange of needs, there is no market of needs, no market of gifts, no gift economy. And so that's why demographics are important again. When you are in a small town, you repeat and repeat and repeat your interactions. You depend on each other. And when someone helps you, you are deeply indebted and you are going to meet that person and you live in the same surroundings and you shared the same space. So you will really try to give back to give back to that person, you are there in the system. And, and I really feel that we are building that here after eight years. You know, like, someone's down emotionally. We have three, four people working on that. Today I was there because someone called me to go there. And that's extremely important. That's the basics of society. Without these, we are not a society. And this is not amazing. This is how bad our societies because we this is special. We are very wrong. I was in Bali, Indonesia with one of the most amazing places in the world. In terms of collaboration and friendship. Don't leave a person like this, as we do.

3. Interview transcript - Juan – May 1st 2021

05:53

C: Okay, so first of all, thank you so much for her for participating and my research. I told you already that I want to do like three parts of the interview. But now we already talked a bit about your relation to the degrowth movement, but maybe we can just come back to that later.

06:23

J: But you can interrupt me at any time, okay? Because when I start talking, I might never stop.

06:28

C: Okay, good.

06:31

J: So that's why I need you to remind me on the topics.

06:36

C: Okay. I will. Yes. I already interviewed one person here in Portugal. He started cooperative. And I think we talked for three hours. We don't have to talk so long.

07:00

J: If you want, we can divide the call in. For example, we can talk today for an hour and then you can call me.

07:08

C: No, I think it's actually totally fine. For one hour. He just talked about his whole idea about life a lot also. I'm trying to just focus now a bit more. I think in one hour, we're done. That's good.. So first, I'd like you to tell me a bit more about yourself, and then about your relation to the degrowth movement, and then about your perception of freedom or liberty. Let's start with your personal background. But you already said that about your education and what you're doing at the moment.

07:57

J: You want me to repeat that?

07:59

C: Yes really, really short.

08:02

J: I studied international relations or international affairs. I have a Master in International cooperation and development. And I have another Master in peace studies in which I made a thesis about the degrowth perspective, involving alternative development measures. In 2016, I founded my blog Kendu Kateak, that means breaking chains in Basque. And I talk about different topics, especially about international armed conflicts and degrowth. Those are the main two topics.

08:46

C: And what relation do you have to the Basque region that you called it a Basque name?

08:50

J: Nothing. I don't any relationship with the Basque country actually. It's just that my football team is Atletico Bilbao. That's a word. And Kendu Kateak has the double K. So that's why. I tried to find two words that started with the same letter. I was in a party and it came up.

09:24

C: You already mentioned before that you grew up in Costa Rica, but what time did you come to Spain? And what is your relation to Spain?

09:32

J: I was born in Costa Rica, but my family is from Madrid. My father came here when he was really little. I went back to Spain seven years ago and I came back because I didn't have a job and I started working in the UN last year and I finished my contract in December. I'm planning to go back to Spain this Summer to see what's going to happen. But no I don't have a work that it's related to what I studied in this moment.

10:13

C: I think at the moment it's really hard to find jobs in general already.

10:20

J: It's really hard here. But the good thing was when I came back here, one year ago, I found a job at the UN in two weeks, it was amazing. So now when my contract finished, I started looking for jobs in Spain and here as well. And I found a couple of nice options, but they didn't call me back. So I started working in a company one month ago, because I need to save some money. And I'm planning to go back to Spain in July to make a guitar course in Valencia. I play electric guitar as well. So I want to go back to make the summer camp thing.

11:09

C: Nice! Now let's talk about your relation to the degrowth movement. You already said that you wrote your thesis on Degrowth, right?

11:25

J: When I started studying my Masters, it was divided in three sections, in peace, conflict and development. In the part on development I knew that some former students were talking about the degrowth thing and degrowth movement and that it was so popular in Switzerland and Germany and that here in Spain, we should start writing about it. They were in some international talks, international organizations and little small talks about the degrowth ideas, but only in Catalonia in Barcelona. So I started investigating by myself. And then when we

started the development classes, a couple of American teachers that we had that were amazing. They introduced us to the degrowth topic. So I started investigating about it. And I really liked it. Because I've been always trying to find a system, that has a different perspective than the relationship between the right and the left my entire life. I always voted for left parties. In Spain, I voted for the Podemos. To find a way that you can convince the people that don't vote for left parties now. Because in a way, you have that dichotomy, especially in Spain, that people that were born on the Franco side, for example, my family, my grandfather, they fought in the war on the Franco side. He didn't kill nobody. But he always talked about Franco and the dictatorship. And on the other hand, you have the other side 50% of that lost war, and they still feel like they lost the war. And that's that what happens in a country that didn't have a real transition, because Spain didn't have a real transition. So in Spain, it's really hard to talk about, these kind of topics with a with a family that has a right-wring perspective, because they always argue that this left ideas are communism. And that's the thing about degrowth. It has, of course, lot of leftist perspectives, but in a way it's not a left perspective only because it doesn't want the state to control the economy. Degrowth just wants to have an economy that works for the future and works for everyone. So I started investigating about it. I wrote my thesis about the degrowth perspective in alternative development measures. And since then, I started I found my blog and I started writing by my own articles about it. That's the only contribution I have to degrowth movement, at this moment.

14:47

C: Do you have any connections to the degrowth movement and their conferences etc.?

14:55

J: The thing is being back here in Costa Rica, the time difference is really hard. I mean, I remember last year I registered in the in the conference, but they were at 3am in the morning and I had to work. So yeah, I watched a couple of them. But I put my blog on the degrowth.info website and I started working with an Italian Dude, that told me about the map. And here in Latin America, there is a degrowth movement that is working with 10 different countries in South America. We have a meeting every month. It's been going really well and we were planning to make conference. But then the COVID thing happened now. So we only have virtual conferences once a month. That's my connection with the Latin American degrowth movement in this moment. And also an Costa Rican economist contacted me, he wrote an article in alternative newspaper here, that I also wrote for. I said: "Dude is incredible!". I've never seen someone talking about degrowth here. So he contacted me and I've been talking with him since then. And we're trying to make like a small gather conference about introducing the degrowth movement or perspective here. But we have different jobs and it's been really hard to make it work. I talked with him last week. And I said to him that we have to plan it and try to make it next month. So we're gonna see what's gonna happen.

16:47

C: But it's not like in Europe that there are also research centers or something like that in Latin America on degrowth is there?

16:53

J: Here you have different economy or alterative economy Research Centers, especially when you're Costa Rica, Costa Rican University, it's the main University here. I don't know if they have it. I know that they told me that they're talking about introducing the degrowth perspective at university. But if I'm honest I don't have any connections with them.

17:17

C: You did like your whole academics career in in Spain, right?

17:26

J: Yes.

17:29

C: All right. And then I have one more question for you: Why do you believe that society should be organized according to degrowth principles?

17:46

J: Because it's the only way that we can achieve a safe future. It is the only way that we can maintain a world that is getting destroyed by the economy that is full of consumerism. That is, because neoliberalism is not only economic thing, it's also a cultural thing now. Because consumerism has nothing to do with voting for a left party or right party. The majority of people buy things that they don't really need. And that's why degrowth idea was always attractive to me. I read books about the Spanish degrowth perspective by a writer called Carlos Table. He is the one that writes about the degrowth movement in Spain as well as a woman called Gaja Rero.

18:55

C: Are they writing in Spanish?

18:58

J: Yes, in Spanish. And they make a lot of confidence about the word. And in a way, we have to make our society understand that if you want to contribute to have a better world, you don't have to consume things that you don't really need. Because it's not only about who. 's controlling the economy. The mass enterprises are the ones that are creating jobs, that are creating the food we eat. It's about having a balance between what our planet can afford and what we can consume in a natural way without destroying the planet.

19:44

C: Yeah, I mean I agree. (laughs)

19:48

J: Remember that I just woke up.

19:53

C: Yes sure, but that's perfect. That's already all the answers I need from you for your relation to the degrowth movement. Because that's more for me to get a bit of an understanding of your activism. And I think like the last part now, the one about your idea of freedom, is the one that I'm most interested in. Yeah, so just let's move on. We can start with a very general question about freedom. I would like to know, what being free for you personally means? I don't want you to think about definitions or anything, but just: what does it mean to be free for you?

20:44

J: For me, freedom is a concept that is not only related with how I feel or how I can be myself, or how I can achieve the things that I want to achieve in life. I think we have to involve the concept of equality. We cannot have freedom without quality. The thing is that in our society we try to think about freedom as a concept of individualism. So I think we had to rethink the concept of freedom, and try to have a link with equality. Because if we have a more egalitarian society, we're going to have more freedom in a way. Because it's not fair that the peoples that live in the upper side of the ladder, are the ones that can answer or define what freedom means.

Especially now, if you think about it, and now in Madrid you are having elections in my birthday in Tuesday, May 4. And now that the dichotomy is thinking about communism or freedom. So the main Conservative Party they are saying that our freedom is at risk. That is totally false, it is ridiculous. But if you think about it, they're trying to argue that the concept of freedom has to do with going out and having a drink and partying until 11. That's our freedom, the Madrilenian way of life. That's what they were saying a couple of days ago. But for me it's sort of ridiculous. Freedom is not is no concept where you have to think about yourself going to the party or going to work and have a good job and all these things. Is that a thing that has to be more equalitarian. In a way that you cannot have a real freedom if your society lives in a huge inequalities. You can see that in Latin America. A lot of people live really good. But the majority live with less than what you can consider normal.

23:36

C: I'm not sure if it was me but you were gone for a bit. For about I think it was like just 30 seconds. Now it works again, though.

23:55

J: But, now I forgot what we were talking about.

23:58

C: We're talking about freedom and how you feel free personally.

24:06

J: Okay. For me, freedom is not about my individual success. But this has to be a common thing. I cannot feel free in a society where I earn \$10,000 per month and my neighbors earn 200 or 500 per month, because for me freedom or has to be a lot with equality. A person that comes from a family that has no money and a person that comes from in a family with money, they have to have the same opportunities of making better for themselves. For example, a poor person has to have the same opportunity to access a health care system, and an educational system as well. So in Latin America, you cannot see that. People with money go to private schools, I went to a private school, for example, I didn't go to a public school. Public universities are much better than private universities. But people here, when they have kids, the first thing they think about is where they're going to send their kids to. And it's a huge business, because in this country, the high schools and schools charge a bunch of money to go to study there. And public schools, of course, are free. But the level, especially in English is really bad. In Costa Rica, for example, you don't have the same opportunities: if you do don't study, for example, and you went to a private school, you have much more opportunities of working in the private sector in a call center, because of your level in English than a person that studied in a public school, because they have a really bad level of English. So what about the freedom of that individual that started working in the public school? How can they get their life much better if they went to a public school? So it's really hard. So for me in a general way, the concept of freedom has to do with the concept of equality.

26:55

C: So you mean equal access, like equal opportunities, right?

27:01

J: Equal access and equal opportunities doesn't mean that you have to take them. It means that the opportunities are there, if you want to take them, you can take them with you if you don't want to take them. That's okay. With the COVID vaccine it is the same thing. A lot of people are thinking that you're gonna die because of the vaccine. It is ridiculous. Then don't take the

vaccine, there are a bunch of people that want the vaccine. So is the same thing within a society, the state has to create the opportunities. If you want to take them is your problem, but the state has to assure you that you have the same opportunities, as a rich person and as a poor person? It's really hard. But if we can achieve that, like the Nordic countries have done it for many years. If we achieve that, I think that my concept of freedom can be achieved. It's a much more free society, if we can achieve a more equal opportunity society.

28:14

C: I have a different question about that . How were people talking about freedom when you grew up? Maybe your teachers or family members? Do you have a saying in your head, what makes people free?

28:34

J: Yeah, I think about our economic system, or neoliberalism or capitalism whatever you want to call it. They try to say that the way to achieve happiness or the way to achieve success is very having a good salary, having kids and a family. That is horrible. And saying that we're going to be free, you're going to have your life solved, you're going to have a nice car, you're going to have a nice life. I'm not arguing that's not a good thing. No, you can do that as well. But also you can work for having a more equal society where more people can have the opportunity to make it. And that's is going on especially in our generation. I'm 31. So I don't know how old are you? We have a big level of education. A bunch of people have masters and they work in call centers, they work in coffee shops. I'm not saying it's a bad job. Of course it's a job but it's really hard to find a good job especially now. So in our society 20 or 30 years from now, when we're going to be old, our concept of freedom that society sells us now is going to be gone. And does the thing about that the degrowth perspective, in a way. It shows us that we don't have two words, or 10 planets, we only have one planet. And that's the first thing I wrote about degrowth, that our planet doesn't give a second chances. We only have one planet. So if we continue making the same mistakes, we're going to destroy the planet. That's what's going on with the carbon emissions and all these things. So we have to achieve a concept of freedom that makes equal society the main focus or the main point.

30:54

C: Okay now let's, let's talk about a bit more about how you personally. Do you have a moment in your life and in which you felt completely free? I would like you to describe that moment if you if you can remember.

31:30

J: And it's really easy. I feel free when I have this thing, my psychologist. (showing his guitar) For me, feeling free or feeling save in my spot is being here and recording. I'm recording a CD. I've been playing like four or five hours since the last five months maybe. So every time I am in my shitty job thinking about that I want to finish the day because I started working at six and I when I go in, I'm like, dude, I want to go out now. And then when I finished my job at 2pm, or 3pm, depends on the day, I come, I come back home, and I started playing. And everything, all the problems that I had during the day are gone. It's the same like when I write an article. I feel free because I can express myself the way I want. That's also the main reason I founded my blog, because I've been writing articles since I'm 18 or 19 years old. I started writing articles in a conservative newspaper, the biggest newspaper of Costa Rica called La Nation. And they said: Dude, you now, you have to write smaller articles, and it's too left, we cannot publish them. So at one point I said fuck you. I'm going to start my own blog and write whatever I want. And for me, that's freedom, making what I want without hurting anyone else, of course. For

me, my freedom is the opportunity to express myself in music by writing. Those are my two main personal things. Yeah, that's when I feel more secure and free.

33:35

C: Nice that we already got that covered. Building on everything that we talked about already, what do you think people need for to be free? So as I understood, you think that people need to be equal to be free to do they need anything else to be free?

34:07

J: They need a stable planet, an economical system that doesn't affect the future that can be stable, and we can continue to have companies and continue to make different projects. A stable planet where we can still make the things we want to do but in a way of changing the concept of what we really need in our life. We don't need to buy things that we don't really need and that's what society needs to understand. I know it's hard because we grew up in a in a capitalist system. So especially for me, I've been fighting it. I really like cars, for example, I have a really old car. And I invest a lot of money in it. And I'm like, Dude, this is ridiculous. But I really like it in a way. I'm not saying that having a car is bad. I'm not against cars. I'm against electrical cars in a way. I wrote a couple of articles about I. Because of the batteries, they're made of really, really limited materials, a thing called in Spanish tierras raras. I don't know how you call it in English. The main country that has all the resources is Congo. Yeah, that is the that is the breadth of Africa. So they need to destroy a lot of forests in order to make those batteries. That's one case and the other the other example is that, I wrote an investigation about it, constructing an electrical car is only 30% less contaminating, then making a gasoline car. Now I went off.

36:41

C: Yeah, now you went off a bit (laughs). But I still think it's interesting.

36:48

J: What was the other part of the question? I forgot.

36:50

C: What do you think people need to be free? So they need to have equality and economic system, you said, that allows for like a stable planet, right?

37:04

J: Yeah, because you know a bunch of people, for example, my friends that have good jobs, they have a good salary, you know, the things that they told us about when we were kids that we needed to have a good life. But you can see that richer societies the levels of stress and anxiety are much higher. And I remember that I also read on a study about people that kill themselves. And the countries with the highest levels of suicidal tendencies are countries that are called the developed countries, especially in the Nordic countries. I know that you have the weather thing and but Japan as well. Costa Rica is the third country in Latin America with the biggest rate of suicidal killings.

37:58

C: Costa Rica is also a rich country in comparison, right?

38:09

J: It's not a rich country. But if you compare it to the rest of Central America, yeah, that's right. They call it the Central American Switzerland.

38:19

C: Really they do? I didn't know that.

38:23

J: The levels of poverty is like 20 to 23% that is low for Latin America. It doesn't have an army ever since 1949. It invests a lot of money in education and health. It has a really good life expectancy. The highest in the world. But people still fight for the money thing. It's a totally Americanized size country. Like the rest of Latin America. If you come here you can see a McDonald's every kilometer and a Burger King and a Taco Bell and a Subway. It is incredible. Malls and malls and huge malls, that you don't see in Europe, but you see them here.

39:12

C: Yes, I remember that from being in the US. It's crazy. So, now we are already fishing with the interview. Thank you for your time!

2. Interview transcript – Graca – 14th of May 2021

00:03

C: Thank you, first of all, for participating in my research. I would like to talk to you about three topics. First I want to know a bit about your personal background and about your relationship to the degrowth movement, and then about your perception of freedom and liberty. And also, it's important for me that it's your personal idea of what it means to be free and not really about any definitions. So let's start with your personal background. And maybe you can tell me a bit about yourself, your education and your job. So where did you grow up? What do you what is your highest educational degree and what's your current job?

00:59

G: Okay, I was born and grew up here in Covilhã, it's a municipality of the interior of Portugal. It's small, we have 50.000 inhabitants. I studied here, I finished here my graduation in sociology in the University Beira interior. It's here in Covilhã. And I worked here and still work until today on initiatives related to do development. First, I worked in development cooperation NGO, where we carried out warning sections about North-South relations. And then I've worked in local development association. And now I work in Coolabora, it's social cooperative. I have 54 years. I have a degree in sociology. I've done postgraduate courses in Coimbra during one year on project management and partnerships. And now I'm finishing a PhD on degrowth and care in alternative local initiatives. I plan to conclude in September. I also interviewed George Gonzalves. And now I work in Coolabora.

02:55

C: Okay, great thank you then we can already start with the second section. So maybe you can tell me a bit about Coolabora. Maybe we can talk about this organization that we work for, and what do you do with it? That would be nice to hear.

03:20

G: Well, I work every day in Coolabora and I am currently the president. It is social intervention cooperatives. My job is mainly a coordinating but we work to promote equal opportunities for women and men and to prevent gender based violence. We have a service to support victims, we also work with people in situations of social vulnerability, such as Roma people, very poor people, or residents in poor social neighborhoods and also with children's who left school early. And we work also in promotion of social alternatives such as direct productive change

networks, or with a social currency. And in the support of small producers. So we have a local store with local products.

04:40

C: Yeah, nice. It's a bit like Minga, right? They as a store and sell local products there.

04:46

G: Yes, but we work a lot with poor people as well.

04:52

C: Okay. And so, in what which way would you think that the cooperative is related to the degrowth movement?

05:06

G: The work of the cooperative?

05:09

C: Yeah.

05:11

G: Well, we promote, for instance, local consumption, through our support of the network of small producers, a collective store, and we make many fairs with a social currency. And I think this is related with degrowth. There is also a direct exchange group, where people can donate goods they no longer need. And we, we also work in reflection debates, seminars, about alternatives. For instance, at this moment, we are conducting a training course on ecology. In the sense of Felix Gatery's large sense of ecology. And meetings, workshops, training courses, etc. We do a lot of work with community with participatory methodologies which empower people and contribute to them being active in defending the rights, promoting citizenship and strengthening democracy. Finally, I think that we work a lot in schools from this region, about global citizenship. And maybe this is also transformative, and also related a little bit with degrowth But my activism in degrowth happens a lot in my local organization where I work daily. And I also participate in the national network of degrowth. But it's only meetings, debates and discussions. It's more theoretical, not so practical.

07:32

C: And now let's go back to yourself. Did you remember when you first heard about the Degrowth movement? And what did you think about it?

07:46

G: The first time I heard about degrowth was through Zidak. Do you know Zidak in Lisbon?

07:53

C: No, I don't actually. What is it?

07:54

G: It's a cooperative. They organized a conference. Maybe you can find it on the internet. I will write you the name later. They organized, I think in 2012 or 2013, a conference with Serge Latouche. I couldn't attend but I was very curious about the topic, because I thought "degrowth what does that mean". But at the time, I thought that degrowth only meant a reduction in production and consumption. Later, I participated in the first forum of ethical finance. I think in 2014 and there was a communication degrowth. And in 2016, Coolabora organized a first

debate about degrowth and that allowed us to understand a little more about the degrowth proposal. And then in 2018 when I started my PhD on alternative local initiatives, I attended a debate about degrowth in Coimbra I met Prof. D'Alisa there. And we talked a lot, and they came to Covilhã to make two workshops at Coolabora. And we debated a lot about what does it mean. And in the beginning, I felt a lot of curiosity, and also some hesitation. Because I have worked all my life in local development initiatives. And I realized that degrowth is also a criticism or a radical criticism for development. But I realized that degrowth is not only about reduction of consumption and production but an alternative proposal for another society with not so much consumption or reduction of consumption and production.

11:06

C: And when you would describe degrowth society, how would that look like to you or what you would you think about degrowth right now?

11:22

G: Yes, it's not just about consumption and production. Maybe it's a society, that produces and consumes less. Not only because the planet has limits, but because this obsession with consumption does not bring us happiness. From the moment we have our needs are met, that our physical needs, are fulfilled. I think it's a proposal with ethnic reasons, physical reasons, maybe static reasons. Degrowth is also a proposal for the redistribution of wealth between North and South, also inside the each country. And it implies a clear change in the incomes and taxes. For instance, with measures like unconditional basic income. Maybe a degrowth society is more focused on providing a good life. And not the life with many, many, many things. Even if the idea of a good life can mean very different things for me, for your, for each person. And maybe it's a more local society, more local, but not closed, and more convivial. And I think this is very important: I think degrowth is only possible in a democratic society, which collectively decides what we want to reduce and maybe what we want to increase. And it's a society that places the sustainability of life, and the care of the planet and the care of each other in the center of our actions. I think degrowth is very much linked with the feminist society. Free from capitalism, neoliberalism, and patriarchal and colonialist domination, maybe it's a more free society. I think your subject is very, very interesting.

14:34

C: Yeah, I mean, I feel that too. We already talked a bit about why you think a society should be organized like that. But if you want to add arguments a degrowth I would like you can also add that.

15:15

G: Maybe we need a degrowth society because we have a serious problem regarding the ecological question. Now we are experiencing the climate crisis, the loss of biodiversity, the degradation of soils. I think it's also unsustainable and unfair, that wealth is not distributed. We have people that are very, very rich and people dying, when they cross the Mediterranean Sea or from starvation for instance. And this is very, very unfair. And because the craving for consumption imprisons us and makes us a slave of our own life. And because colonialist domination, capitalism and the patriarchal structures subordinate women, degrades the planet, and we are not happy like that. I think the degrowth needs to be also very feminist.

16:39

C: Right now it's really interesting for me to see the connection between feminism and degrowth, because I have a I have an online magazine. I founded it last year. And our theme right now is called matriarchy and we write about trying to turn this idea of patriarchal structures

upside down. And yeah, for me, it's like I learn a lot with it right now, because I never really that was not diving so much into that topic. And I think maybe it's would be a nice idea to kind of combine that in a way. But maybe if I if I read an article and come back to you and ask you a bit more about that. Okay, so then let's go to the last section about your perception of freedom. And maybe we start with a very general question: What does being free mean to you? What does it mean to you personally, to be free?

17:57

G: To be free, is maybe the possibility of achievement or realization on individual and also collective level. It's self-determination, and the possibility of choice based on our self-interests. And in the interests which I belong. It's possibility of political choice and the possibility to talk about to my ideas, to express of my ideas, and maybe the possibility of having the basic conditions of life ensured, because if we don't have this, we cannot be free. I don't think a lot about freedom. This question is very, very interesting. I realize that only when I read your interview, maybe I need to think more about that.

19:17

C: I will also send you the thesis when it's done, then you can see maybe see the connection there.

19:26

G: Okay.

19:29

C: So, maybe we'll just talk about the way that you perceive freedom in a different way. So when you raised about to think about freedom: Do you remember something that your parents told you or something that your teachers told you what it means to be free and how you reacted to it?

19:53

G: I think my teachers or my parents only told me about political freedom. And almost every year on the 25 of of April. Only in these moments, we talked a little bit about freedom, but only in a very formal way. About the right to vote, the right to have an opinion. And I think it's absolutely important for our individual fulfillment. Anyway, in practical terms in my childhood I was educated to try to be autonomous. And maybe that is also related to freedom. And this remained in my life. But we didn't talk about freedom at school or with my parents.

21:09

C: It was not a topic. Okay. And but do you remember some moment in your life where you were actually feeling free? Where you felt in that moment, now I'm really free?

21:27

G: It's not easy to think about in a moment. I think I feel really free when I walk in the mountains. I love to walk in the mountains. I don't know very well how to explain it, but maybe it's because I feel more aware of who I am, and more aware of the potential of life. But I don't know how to explain it. Maybe the immensity of the mountains. These structures of domination that are in our day to day life seem not relevant anymore then. But I also feel free and happy when I choose what I want. And I can say no to someone who wants to impose something on me. Even though that may shock people, when I have the right to say. This is freedom also.

22:41

C: Yeah, that makes sense. You just talked about the domination of societal structures and that you don't feel it when you in the in the mountains? Is it also something that you think that people need to be free, do they need to be free from those structures?

23:12

G: Yes.

23:14

C: So when you would think about it: What do people actually need to be free? What is it what they need?

23:19

G: I work with very poor people. And I think if they don't have basic need satisfied. Those who live in scarcity cannot be free. Some people, for instance, cannot easily guarantee their needs or the needs of their family. They can't be free. And we can't be free if we don't live in a democratic society. Because in Portugal, this is very present. The right to have an opinion, the right to vote. But we can also have freedom, when we are free of domination mechanisms. We can be different, but the difference cannot be at the base of the inequality. I think, for example about racism here. We work in Coolabora a lot with Roma people and the difference is converting into inequality for them. And we cannot be free in patriarchal culture, because of the domination of women. If the message every day is to be subordinate this is not freedom. And maybe for a free life we need to live safely and we need to be able to choose what we value most. Maybe that is most important to be free. I don't know if you can understand my English.

25:53

C: No of cause I they can. And I already have everything, all the answers.

26:05

G: Okay, great! When you think you will finish your work?

26:13

C: I will finish in the end of June and send it to you then. I'm going to stop the recording now, since we're done. Thank you very much.

4. Interview transcript - Niklas – 14th of May 2021

00:01

C: Can I record the interview?

00:05

N: Yes, sure.

00:08

C: Great, then thank you for participating in my research. This interview is only going to be used for my master dissertation, I'm not going to use it for anything else, also the transcript. And you already signed the consent form. That's great. And so I would like to talk to you about your activism in relation to Degrowth and your perception of freedom and liberty. But I would like to break the interview into three parts. First, we talk about a bit about your personal background, about your education and your job that you're doing right now, then about your

activism, and then about your perception of freedom. So if you're ready, we can start.

00:54

N: Yes.

00:55

C: Perfect. So first of all, I would like you to tell me a bit about yourself about your education and your job. So where did you grow up? What is your highest educational degree? And what are you doing currently? What is your job?

01:19

N: Okay. So let's do this chronologically. I grew up in northern Germany, in a white, middle class family, close to Hamburg. Both my parents have higher education. And I grew up with three siblings. So after going to local school, I went to Uni, to different universities in Germany, and finally, concluded Uni with a PhD in chemistry.

01:55

C: Interesting!

01:59

N: Yeah, so that's that. But after having spent another half a year in the chemistry department doing teaching on sustainable chemistry, I resigned from uni and went to work in my own NGO for half a year. And then after that, I was kind of reorienting and unemployed. And after a training in climate and resource management, I found a job at Oxfam, which is an NGO in Germany. I worked as a climate campaigner. It was only it was short projects, as well as just a half year project. Then I went to do what I'm doing right now, which is being self-employed, with a long friend of mine and colleague of mine, and we are consultants for teams, municipalities and also research departments, on the issues of working together in a sound and healthy way. So we work for clients, which have like a sustainability focus. So you might claim like helping people who do good things to do it also nice for themselves.

03:53

C: So it's a consultancy for teamwork?

03:53

N: Yes, consultancy for teamwork, but we also have projects where we help with an expertise on sustainability. So we also write project proposals. And we facilitated workshops where we have guests from the sustainability scene. So and obviously there it's useful and we need to like also have an overview of the debate.

04:32

C: And on the other side, you are also working for this initiative called common future, right?

04:41

N: Yes, yes, that's right. And also other initiatives, that kind of popped up from this common future project.

04:53

C: Okay, nice. So there are different ones, but they are related to sustainability and to degrowth and to this kind of ideas, right?

05:04

N: Yeah.

05:06

C: Alright, now I would like to talk to you a bit about the Degrowth movement, but maybe you can explain me actually a little bit about the common future initiative and tell me what it is about. So I get a bit of an idea what it is.

05:22

N: So I co-founded it in 2008. And at that point it was an international project. And the idea was to connect young, let's say academics from all over the world to, find a multi perspective view on global challenges, like climate change and justice and related issues. And after the cup of 2009, we kind of like couldn't hold it. So it fell apart. And I, together with some other friends, we kind of reinvented common future. And we are basically with the same team now since then. Yeah, about 10 years now. We build a small NGO which conducts projects on global issues, and how global justice is related to the way of living here. So what we do is, we work in Germany and Austria, but not abroad yet. We started with documenting congresses. About degrowth and other climate related congresses and workshops, we conducted interviews, and talks and stuff like that. And moved on to develop trainings for activists. Also for young activists but also for more experienced ones, well some with first work experience, maybe. So that's not too many, but we always have some projects running. And from that there has been spin offs. Which are other projects, which are not happening inside common future but they
Still related

08:12

C: Yes, it makes sense. When you meet other people, then you also have a different idea. And you created basically the other idea out these interactions, right?

08:20

N: Yeah, it's basically the people from the training, they're now doing their own stuff. So the two main projects, there has been li two groups that have kind of, developed their own NGO.

08:40

C: And in what kind of way would you say that it relates to the idea of degrowth or to the Degrowth movement?

08:53

N: On a personal level, one of the cofounders of the second part of common future at the time, when we started it, two of us were also quite active in the degrowth movement. They were also the co-founders of another degrowth focused NGO, which is called Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie and which is now a major player in the degrowth movement in Germany. They're the ones, who who have been organizing the largest conferences on degrowth in Germany and stuff like that. So there is this personal interlinkage and obviously they also brought the content. So in the first few years, we were more oriented on filming, for example, and then putting videos about degrowth on YouTube. They were more scare then.

10:19

C: And about conferences where people talked about degrowth, right?

10:28

N: Yeah. And so that's also the way how I personally got involved with the movement. Because beforehand, I was politicized more in the environmental movement, let's say. And so that's how I got to these conferences, how I got to know some of these people and how I got to know the idea. And within the common future, in 2015 one of our members of the board, he got in contact with two researchers and they developed, I don't know what you want to call it, a theory or an image how we got to the situation we are in and it's called, imperial mode of living. And so since then we made a project out of this and now like we are one of those people who are spreading the word about this analysis. And since then, I think we've kind of adopted this as a framing for our work. And the bottom in there I think is very similar to what you read in in degrowth books. Yeah, I wouldn't say so. I think it was 2013 or 2014, when there was one of the first major degrowth conferences in Germany. By then, I first had a glimpse of it and that this might be some sort of movement. But even now it doesn't feel to be such a consistent movement to me, somehow.

13:39

C: Yeah, it's very diverse, I think.

13:43

N: Yeah, that'd be interesting to think about what lies at the core of degrowth? I don't know. Yeah. Yeah. But it's also it's really academic, right? It's not really.

14:01

C: Yeah. But it's also it's really academic, right? It's not really practical. I'm speaking to a few people at the moment who are always kind of, in a way related to the degrowth movement, but most of them are, not academics or don't write about it so much. And then I always feel like yeah, there is no connection. It is an academic movement. They write about it, they have conferences, but they're not connected to the ground basically, to do initiatives that actually do things that would be similar to what they are doing.

14:39

N: Yeah. The examples are still rare, quite rare, and they are the same examples being repeated. Even though there's some movement in that. I'm involved now, because I'm also an participant of one of the trainings we give. And like this I got in touch with other people. So anyway, I'm involved in one project where we are actually working more on the base now. It's in the municipality, where I live. It's some rural area in the middle of nowhere in Germany. We have quite a few actors of solidarity economy here. And community supported companies. And so what we're doing is to connect them with local politics and other conservative institutions, like the Industrie- und Handelskammer. So yeah. And from that I'm recognizing that in this CSX movement, that there are things happening more than a few years ago.

16:36

C: Yeah, I have the feeling, too that it's constantly evolving. And so maybe we'll just go to you personally for one more question. I mean, you already talked about when you got in contact with the degrowth movement. When you heard first about the degrowth moment, what did you think about it? Were you curious? And then how did your relationship with this idea evolve?

17:15

N: I first came across these ideas as the word Postwachstum. So in Germany both terms exist. And from my point of view, degrowth is, I can't nail it down, but I have the feeling that it's a more holistic approach. But anyway, so I come came across Postwachstum through a talk that

Nico Paech gave at University of Göttingen, where I studied at that time and yeah what happened?

18:08

C: Do you remember how you discussed about it after that with your colleagues?

18:17

N: Yeah, I mean, I remember like sitting there and watching since we filmed it I also like watched it afterwards. Yeah, I think I was intrigued by the idea of a partial deindustrialization. If we managed to close some of these gaps locally, to provide the goods, we need through more local repair and product cycles, then we could be less involved with a globalized resource cycle. And being less involved would allow us to work less because we need less money to spend on things. And I really like this link, because by then, for me, it was all about trying to reduce resource input. And I think I was inspired by the linkage to the reduction of work time, of paid work time. Yeah, I think that was kind of what hooked for me. And the term itself, I mean, growth is something that's been in the media as an imperative all the time I've lived. So putting "de" or "post" to it was quite radical.

20:43

C: Yeah, I think so, too. Now, think about your relationship with the degrowth movement? Are you rather critical about it? Or do you completely agree with the ideas that they have?

20:55

N: Hmm. I agree with a lot of things. I agree with analysis of status quo, I think. And also with the ideas in which direction to go, somehow. My approach to change is, I got the feeling, not mainstream within the degrowth movement. But it's linkable. But in some details, yeah.

21:55

C: Maybe you can talk about that, what do you think we need for change? I mean, that's also for me, personally, really interesting.

21:58

N: So I've worked in campaigning. And I've got the feeling that in the degrowth movement, and also within the German NGOs, there is a strong perception of power relations, which is very important. However, with the perception of power relations, and the analysis, how they've been overcome, that have been overcome in the past, there is the tendency first to look for levers. Where with low input, I can get high change. From my point of view, that's a little too mechanistic. It doesn't work on grand scale like this. I'll come back to that later. And second is that there is a tendency to frame change as a struggle and for sure, many changes have involved struggles. However, in a saturated society as we live in still it's not a crisis torn society yet. I think that's yet to come. So it doesn't appeal. I can see it. I mean, I've also worked with people not from the movement. So first of all, from a personal point of view, I don't see so much the levers I see like change agent and every person I meet, wherever they work, whatever they do. And this comes alongside with a perception that inner change and outer change are interlinked. One of our main pain in society and at the core of the crisis is some sort of disconnection. Also from oneself. And you could also adapt this to patriarchy, and racism. The white and the men, they are also disconnected the pain they're inflicting on others. So that's like the personal level and then... Now lost track of my thought. So, what I tried to do, I mean it's not like I'm arriving there again. But what I'm trying to do is framing change rather as some sort of reconciliation, then as a struggle. And reconciliation that also notices why we've come here and how we've come here. And, yes, there has been progression. From fossil fuels, for example, there has been

good in it from some perspective, and appreciating that people decide for it, and they weren't just like, fully blind or evil or ignorant. It was people who decided to do these things, and they had their reasons. And so my perspective is rather like just appreciating the reasons. And then pointing out that from another perspective, let's say for more global justice perspective, it was a dead end. So you gonna turn around. Yeah, something like that. Rather than like, it's all a struggle.

27:07

C: Yeah. So it's more a transformation, in general, because we're actually not in a crisis yet. Or we don't experience the crisis as a crisis.

27:24

N: Yes, I think we are in deep crisis. But so far, in most areas, where we are running coping strategies, not solution strategies. And one of the coping strategies is to, one of the really strong coping strategies to cut yourself off from it, from the crisis you're in.

27:53

C: Okay, so let's come back a bit to the Degrowth movement. It was really interesting. But maybe

we can talk a bit like about just one more thing that I want to know about? Why do you think it is a good idea to scale down production? We talked about that already a bit. But maybe, to recap, express your reasons why you think such a society is important and that we should degrow our economies and try to reuse more and things like that. So why is it so important?

28:51

N: I think there are different reasons. I mean, there's the easy one, which is the ecologic reason that building on growth, means apart from human exploitation, also resource exploitation, and this will run into limits, which will then like narrow down our chances to host a good livelihood for future generations and also for those who live here already. On the other side, I think it also has to do with, and it's really it's linked to what I said before, a more, let's say, circular way of looking at how we do economy. I think it holds a much greater chance so that working actually satisfies ourselves. Because there's the connection. And so...I find it hard to express now. But it doesn't only help those ones who suffer from the growth model, but it also is a way for those who profit from growth based economies to find satisfaction in themselves, in slowness, and in indulging in nature, in food, and fabrics we wear.

31:03

C: Yeah, because money doesn't make happy, right?

31:09

N: No, it's a means. Quite often we fail in finding smart solutions to satisfy our needs. So we have needs, yes. But right now on the growth based model, we pick very ridiculous satisfiers.

31:45

C: Oh yes, even I do that. Okay. Now I think I know everything about the way that you see the degrowth movement, or at least everything that I need to know for my thesis. And now I would like to move on to the last part, and this is about your perception or understanding of freedom. Maybe we just start with a very general question first. What does it mean to you to be free, personally?

32:22

N: Most often, it's an inner freedom. So I say that from a position where my outer freedom is not questioned though. So by outer freedom, I mean the amount of security I need to be free from worries

about my own. Like, where am I gonna sleep, where am I gonna be safe, how do I feed myself? How am I connected? Do I have some basic human connections? So that's what I mean by outer freedom. So luckily, that's safe for the near future. So for me, most of my thinking and also my practice of freedom is about inner freedom. Which is am I free from anxiety, from anger, from expectations I have of my own? Because even though I live a comfortable life these are the things that give me hard times.

And I think that's also an expression of a growth based world, that the these are my struggles.

34:34

C: Yeah, that's could be true. Okay, now, do you remember a time or do you remember times in which you feel very free and can you could you describe that for me?

34:50

N: Yeah, I have moments of freedom.

34:55

C: Yeah, that would be great. If you could just describe that. That would be perfect.

35:00

N: So I can feel it in my guts. It's very relaxed then and there's some joy in myself where I can't really like relate it to. I feel okay, there's the joy. I can sense that it's there first and then the brain makes an interpretation and that might make me be happy right now. It's a state of mind where the feeling anything could happen now. Anything good, Anything bad, Any catastrophe? And I would be looking at this like: "Oh, something's changing". Completely relaxed. So that's when I feel free.

36:10

C: But can you describe the circumstances in which you would have that feeling? I'm more interested in what makes you feel that way?

36:20

N: So it comes most often when I go for a walk. So being in nature and having nothing to do really helps. It also happens when, like in a group of people, that I feel belonging to a lot.

37:08

C: And maybe can you also think about a situation where you felt very unfree on the other side? And why did you feel unfree in that moment?

37:26

N: So there are two situations when if you aren't free. One is when, and this the less dominant way, I run into a situation where I feel pressure and I don't see how I can escape this pressure. So like when there's a lot of workload, and I don't really see any other way than just doing it. And knowing that doing it would exceed my capacity. But the more dominant way is, when I find myself in a state of mind,

Where I am triggered, where can sense some real deep wound has been touched here. And lacking the capacity of attending to it. So that's when I feel that an old anger in myself is stronger than myself. It's kind, like a demon. It's grabbing tightly, and I don't know the why because I know that the demon is weaker than I am. But I don't know. I don't know how and that's when

I'm really like, my mind is circling my headrace is up. And I'm like, constantly angry, either at myself or other people. And that feels incredibly unfree from the inside. Even though on the outside, I can still act, I can still work I can still do a things but it feels so uncomfortable. And that's a typical, what's it called, "Entwicklungsstrauma". Developmental trauma, but yeah, but that I know that quite well too.

39:54

C: So feeling free is then connected to your emotions a lot, right?

40:00

N: Yes, so feeling free is then being free from emotions, which doesn't mean to be free from feelings but from emotions.

40:08

C: From heavy emotions, from anger?

40:13

N: No, not that like, from old emotions. Anger in the present form is fine. It's uncomfortable, but I don't feel I'm free and that.

40:28

C: Okay, yeah, I get that. So it's connected with something in the past.

40:35

N: Yes, something in the past that can't really shake off and I can't act in the moment because if I'm angry at some person because he or she is behaving like shit. That's a way to deal with it. "Well, what are you to doing? Stop that!"

41:00

C: And now I would like to move on a bit more from you personally to the society that you live in and how you experience the idea of freedom around you, of people that are maybe not yourself. I have one question for you that is more linked to how you were raised to think about freedom, about the idea of freedom. So do you have anything that you remember about family or teachers? Maybe that told you what freedom is? And can you maybe also explain how you thought about it at that moment? And how you would think about it now?

41:40

N: Yeah, I can remember like, when in school, I came across this so called Golden Rule: Only do the things that you want other people to do? Kant's imperative. Yes. And I was like: Yes, that's it! I think a little bit earlier that a friend of mine introduced me to, I don't know who it was, some economist or philosopher with the "veil of ignorance". Which means that we should construct a society in a way, so that doesn't make any difference in which house, you're going to be born. So that's the veil of ignorance. So, I don't know where I'm going to be born. And from that perspective, I should, contribute to society. So these things really made sense to me. And the freedom was then the thing for me that I imagined a kind of a physical and social space that everyone should have. So everyone should have the chance to feed oneself, to have a house to, move wherever they want to go, to meet people, they want to meet, things like this. So what I've been told, freedom to be, is then to have these chances, to have possibilities in life. That's what I've been told freedom is. And I've also acted to it in a way because I recognized that, of course, higher education opens possibilities, but also deciding on things opens possibilities. Deciding on okay, I'm going to study chemistry opens up possibilities for further education

rather than not deciding on anything. So I lived to it quite a long time. Maybe until two or three years ago. And the concept of inner freedom is rather young for me. But now it plays such an important role for myself also. Before I just took this outer freedom, what I described first it as thing to do. But my inner state of mind and being, I took them for granted. Just like waves that come and go.

45:26

C: But then you didn't connect it to freedom in the first place?

45:32

N: No, that's true.

45:38

C: Okay. Then I have one last question for you: When you look at society, what do you think, what do people need to be free? We already talked a bit about that. But if you would think about it on a larger scale than only yourself when you describe a society, take German society for example, what do people need to be free in that society?

46:10

N: So I think that secured material and social safe space is still the base for freedom. As long as I'm not secure as I don't feel secure and accepted and as an accepted part of the society, and accepted from the people who are in my closest surrounding. I think it's very hard to be free.

46:18

C: You talked about the outer freedom already, maybe you can explain that a little more and say what you think is necessary for the outer freedom to exist before inner freedom can happen?

47:35

N: I won't say it's like that linear, but it's a strong base. So you want to know, like, what kind of like to specify more?

48:01

C: Yes, I basically want to know a bit more about the conditions in which you would be living. Your material needs are fulfilled? And you have people around you that you can trust, right? Is there anything else that could constrain you from actually having that freedom. And if you turn that around, what could you also make unfree in that situation?

48:28

N: Freedom of mobility is also quite important to me personally. And also things like the freedom to speak out what I think. I probably take too many things for granted. For sure also the allowance and the actual possibility to co-shape society. And co-shape nature. Yes. To put plants from A to B. We take it for granted, but it's not an old culture, that is the case. Yeah, I guess I didn't know. I guess that's what I think is creating space outer freedom. And then for inner freedom I think things like less work time also be cool. And less dominant norms in ways of living. If you think about living in heterosexual marriage, for example. Things like these are like also putting high pressure on freedom .

50:50

C: So it's also a bit about the societal structures which can influence the way you feel free, right?

51:08

N: Yes, white norms and also norms of having to work ,having to do paid work, status symbols but also status work which can be unpaid also.

51:29

C: Okay, great. I think we are done now. Thank you for your time and participation. I'm going to turn the recording off now.

5. Translated interview transcript - Christiane – May 28th 2021

00:00:00

Carlotta: I'd record it again here too.

00:00:04

Christiane: Well, I haven't prepared at all.

00:00:06

Carlotta: That's not a problem at all. It's more about your very personal attitudes and moments where you feel free and your own relationship to the degrowth movement. It's not really about preparing in any way.

00:00:28

Christiane: How many people do you interview, if I may ask?

00:00:31

Carlotta: Six people at the moment. So there are two people from Germany, two from Portugal and two from Spain. I'm studying International Studies and I'm not really comparing it, but I'm doing a collective case study. So I'm interviewing different people who somehow have a connection to the degrowth movement, but are not necessarily part of it. So they're not necessarily part of the academic movement, but somehow have a different relation to it.

00:01:10

Christiane: But it's not Gualter who you are interviewing from Portugal is it?

00:01:13

Carlotta: No. In Portugal I interviewed two people who have founded two different cooperatives. In Germany, I'm now working with someone from Berlin who has built up a network called Common Future and in Spain with someone who writes a blog. It's all a bit mixed. Exactly. Yes, as I said, I would divide the interview into three parts. First of all, I would want to know a bit about your background, what you studied, what you're currently doing. So what kind of job you have. And then about your relationship to the degrowth like movement or post-growth here in Germany.

00:02:17

Christiane: Well, whereas degrowth and postgrowth are two different things in Germany. But well.

00:02:23

Carlotta: Yes that's right, and then at the end what interests me most is your concept of freedom. What is freedom for you? We'll just go through it like this. And then we'll start with the first part. I would just ask you to tell me a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up? What kind of education did you do? What did you study and what is your profession right now?

00:02:58

Christiane: Yes, I grew up on the outskirts of Cologne. Königsdorf is the name. In a family house neighborhood. I'm the only child of two rather intellectual parents and I did my A-levels there. In other words, a completely normal German middle-class childhood. And then, crazy enough, I started studying Islamic Studies and Philosophy. I was interested in Islamic Studies because I had a Turkish friend and believed this culture to be so interesting. And then I realized during my studies that I had to start with Arabic. So I started with Arabic and became so obsessed with this language. Then I went to Syria for two years, studied in Syria for two years from 88 to 90 and then continued my studies in Bonn, got my Master's degree and then started a journalistic traineeship at Deutsche Welle. I also finished that. Then I was an editor in the Arabic editorial department there, but then I met my ex-husband, who came from Dubai, from the United Arab Emirates. Then I quit my job and went to Dubai with him. We stayed there for two years. Then we went back to Germany for his work and in the meantime we already had a child. Then we had two more children in those years. Then we went back to Dubai after five years. Then came the fourth child. I always worked as a translator in Dubai. Yes, that's a story that's too long to tell, but we came back to Germany in 2007 with four children. And then I was 40 and I thought, "Well, now you have to start your career again somehow, because otherwise it's not going to work out at all in this life. And then I was lucky enough to get a job at the UN in the Climate Change Secretariat. The path to degrowth began in Dubai already. Because Dubai is clearly the place where you get a great demonstration of how things should not be done. It is totally racist, it is materialistic. Capitalism shows its worst, ugliest face there. Often dressed up as 'glamour' and whatnot. So I felt really, really, really awful there and also felt very disconnected, because all the other Europeans there were into that kind of things: big houses and cars and beach clubs and so on. And for me, it was all superficial and I didn't really find any like-minded people there. So I was really happy to be back here. And also this whole environmental issue came very, very close to me in Dubai and that's why I was super happy that I had a job at the Climate Change Secretariat because I thought "Wow, I can do something good here, I can really do something positive here". So I'm not only earning my money, but I'm also doing something good. At first I was in the secretarial department and then something became available in public relations and since I was a journalist I got it. I did public relations work for emissions trading mechanisms. That's where I got involved. I quickly realised that "Oh, actually, none of this is really a good idea". On my second or third day in the job, I received emails from NGOs that were totally critical of everything and I thought, "Yes, of course, you're totally right, where can I join in?" But of course I had to represent the official UN position. I worked there for a few years, but it became clearer and clearer to me that the way things are done at the UN simply will not save the climate. And in 2008, during the financial crisis, I also thought, "Well, now the last ones have noticed it too. This system is bad, we need a system change now". But nobody noticed. Afterwards, I often thought to myself, "What's the problem in all this?" Another crucial point for me was the Rio+20 environmental summit in 2012. Of course, our inner UN Climate Change Secretariat was insanely involved and when it was over, I really thought this can't be true, things have gotten worse everywhere. Climate, biodiversity and so on. And what is the answer? We just keep doing the same shit we've been doing and call it green growth. That's where they lost men in terms of content. But let's come back to degrowth and post-growth. It was actually clear to me as a teenager that this eternal growth is bullshit and of course I was always made fun of back then: "you have no idea, you're stupid, you have no idea about the economic context and so on". And then, for a while, I really believed that I was

somehow a little girl and that as long as I didn't study economics, I couldn't say anything at all about it, and I sort of always pushed my own realization away. But then in 2012 I said to myself: "It just doesn't work. It's so obvious that this is such nonsense". Then I went to the climate change secretariat, where we always hold such retreats, start-up meetings and a whole bunch of stuff, always tried to bring up the subject. But I was always rebuffed with the comment, "Yeah, you German intellectuals with your little games. Tell the Chinese". Yeah, well. And then I decided, that was in 2013, that I would take a sabbatical year and in that time I would return to my journalism profession and start writing about such topics. At that time, not so much was written about it yet. I tried to get the topic into all kinds of media, with more or less success, sometimes with, sometimes without. And then I joined the organizing team of the degrowth conference in Leipzig in 2014. It was a super huge event, 3000 people came. There was a lot of media hype. I was part of the organizing team and did the public relations for it. I also somehow managed to get Degrowth into the Guardian with a lot of work. Yes, the conference was just great. Everyone was in such a mood of optimism. There was a huge media response and of course afterwards it all fizzled out in all this growth talk. Right then, I was completely freelance and then I was also part of Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie in Leipzig for a long time, I worked for the Degrowth web portal. That also ended in 2017. I then survived for a year completely free, with lectures and writing and so on. Then I looked for a permanent job, a part-time job, which I still have now. It's with EADI, the European Association of Development, Research and Training Institute. It deals with institutes in the field of international relations, which is what you also do. Yes, it is an association of these scientific institutes in the field of development. I now do public relations work there and it's quite a good compromise, because it also includes a lot of degrowth and decolonial thinking and such. And of course I always try to focus on these issues a bit in my public relations work. Yes, that's my career, sorry, a bit longer, because I'm also a bit older.

Carlotta: Yes, that's true. We have already talked quite a lot about your relationship with the degrowth movement. But can you remember when you first heard about degrowth, as an academic movement, or when you became aware that there was a movement? Maybe you can just reiterate how you came into contact with it.

00:11:17

Christiane: I started reading this kind of stuff in 2010/2011, and that's when I first noticed that there were economists writing this kind of stuff and I thought, "Oh, look at that! Even people with a degree in economics think what I think, not just me". Then I started reading these things and tried to keep up with everything that was published academically. That worked for a while, but at some point it became too much. So thank God, it's nice that more has been developed. Exactly. And then I read more and more in this direction and I didn't see it as a social movement or anything. I just saw, "Ah, there are a lot of people, they're thinking about it, they're writing great things. It speaks from my soul. It kind of gives me a lift. I think it's great. It needs to be brought to attention more". And in the course of my search for material and sources, because I also wanted to write journalistically, I came across the fact that in 2012 or 2013 there was to be a degrowth conference in Germany in 2014. I just thought "great, I'll go there and write about it". And then it turned out that they were still looking for people to co-organise. And then I thought, "Great, I'll join in, that's my thing". Then I joined the team and started to help with the public relations work, with setting up the website. And that's when I met a lot of other perspectives and people. Of course. Before, I was alone with the academic publications and my own thoughts that I had. And there I came across a lot of other perspectives, which I found totally exciting.

00:13:06

Carlotta: Yes, I can imagine that. If you were to think of a society that should be oriented according to degrowth principles, what would this society look like? So what is your own idea of it?

00:13:29

Christiane: Yes my own idea is that of course much more would be local and on the ground. A much more localized economy. And that, of course, exchange and travel and so on would still be possible, that's for sure. And I imagine that it would work a bit like this: each according to his needs, each according to his abilities. Maybe it's also a two-part thing. You do one thing that you are good at, you do it for the community, but you always do it according to your needs. You don't produce anything because you just want to sell it but really only something that people need. In other words, adapted to the local regional needs. And on the other hand, you might do things that simply have to be done, such as weeding or simply doing physical work somewhere and dividing it up a bit. And I also imagine that not everyone necessarily lives in the community or something. That would be very one-sided. But in any case, no matter whether you live in a family, in shared flats, in larger communities or otherwise, people should work together more. That more things are provided collectively, such as lunch for the neighbourhood. Or I imagine, for example: In every neighbourhood there is a house where all the people bring things they no longer need. And all the people take out things they need. But then someone also takes care of it. That it simply all circulates and circulates much more. There will probably be much less industrial production and the industrially produced things will of course be used much longer, shared more. And it primarily needs jobs in agriculture, because if you want to do that with much less fossil energy, of course you need more manual labour there. But it must not be a form of servitude, as it used to be, but must of course also offer people a quality of life and leisure time. So everything simply needs to be divided up differently. Much more democratic co-determination, of course, i.e. communal, regional or perhaps even neighbourhood or street or village-based self-organisation.

00:16:13

Carlotta: Yes, thank you very much. That's nice to hear again how you imagine it concretely. And I also read that you lived in the Seven Lives Ecovillage.

00:16:31

Christiane: That's exactly where I lived for a year. I really wanted to live degrowth, to live in practice and support this project. Well, because my daughter didn't come along and neither did my boyfriend, I went back after a year because no one followed me. But otherwise it would have been a real concept of life for me. In such a larger community, where many things are decided together, where fruit and vegetables have to be grown. That is also a bit of self-sufficiency, village self-sufficiency, where life takes place in the village again, where it is still a small village in the middle of a flat country. But with culture and pubs and cinema and yoga and sports. So anything you felt like, you could offer and then a few people would join in. So it's not only about work and food, but also about organising the things that are fun together again.

00:17:36

Carlotta: The connection wasn't so good. But yes, I also found it really exciting to hear how everything is organized in such a village. But maybe it's going too far into detail now. You can also look at it, can't you?

00:17:58

Christiane: Of course, you can just go there. I don't know, but have you heard about the Degrowth project in movements?

00:18:04

Carlotta: No, unfortunately not.

00:18:06

Christiane: There is also a little film from Seven Lives with Me. And I also wrote an article about degrowth and eco villages.

00:18:18

Carlotta: Oh yes, that would be totally exciting!

00:18:20

Christiane: I can copy the chat for you right now. I'll find it right away. Keep on asking.

00:18:29

Carlotta: I also have just one more question about degrowth. I would like to hear again exactly why you think that societies should be organised according to degrowth principles. Just that you reiterate why exactly this is important for you.

00:18:54

Christiane: I'm just sending you the article, then I'll answer that right away. Ah, there is the article. Yes, first of all there is the need...

00:19:16

Christiane: Oh, the connection was bad. Shall I start again?

00:19:19

Carlotta: Yes, with pleasure. Thank you.

00:19:22

Christiane: Yes, there are clearly planetary boundaries. Or simply the need to observe these limits that nature simply shows us. It is quite clear that we want to keep the climate stable. We want to preserve biological diversity. We want to preserve the soil, the oceans, in other words, our entire basis of life. They have been completely overused and destroyed everywhere. In this respect, it is clear that this capitalist model cannot continue. And then, of course, the question is: we have all these billions of people in the world now, are values like social justice and human rights important to us? If so, we have to say quite clearly: here are the borders and there are our values. Then nothing other than degrowth will come out of it. Then nothing else can come out of it. So if we really take it seriously. And if we think it through to the end. We don't want authoritarian regimes, we don't want that. We want self-determination. Of course, that can happen in a democracy, which of course needs to be expanded much more and which goes far beyond representative democracy. And then local self-determination and at the same time global cooperation. And that is not possible with perpetual growth, because this capitalist growth is actually something completely inefficient. It creates so much waste and things that are not needed and on the other hand artificially creates scarcities where something is needed. And it can only be a question, if we only have limited commons, i.e. limited common goods at our disposal, of finding the most intelligent way to grant everyone the best possible opportunities for use, whatever these look like, they can be very diverse. And that is only possible with a very needs-oriented economy that is really oriented towards the needs of those

for whom it is produced and, of course, also the needs of those who produce it. And to bring that together with self-determination and democracy; yes, then degrowth comes out of it. And you write your work about freedom. Freedom, as it is often understood here in this individualistic West, and as it is often carried before us by the FDP and its ilk. There is no freedom in a vacuum. There can be no such thing as freedom of the individual. There is always a web of relationships woven by everyone else. And even this freedom that is always so propagated, the freedom to fly and eat meat and drive a car. Yes, the meat, the cars, the planes are produced by others. The others have to do it first, so that you can do it. Yes, you are not free alone. And I am convinced that the balance between the greatest possible freedom for the individual and respect for the greater whole and for the freedom of others is, so to speak, at the interface of degrowth. There is always a tension between "I want to be free, I want to be able to do what I want" and "Oha. But there are limits and there are others who also have freedom and who also have rights." So, how do I balance that best? And how do I find the best balance? Everything in the world, after all, is about finding balance. Or that's how it should be. Only in capitalism, it's kind of lost sight of it.

00:23:06

Carlotta: Good, we've already built a bridge to the topic of the concept of freedom. Thank you. And I think I would just like to hear again how you personally see freedom. So we can start with a general question...

00:23:39

Christiane: Oh the connection is not good right now. But we can turn the video off.

00:23:43

Carlotta: Yes, maybe we'll turn it off for a moment.

00:23:46

Christiane: We can turn the video off. Maybe it's better with the audio. Wait, I'll stop my video.

00:23:50

Carlotta: Yeah, great.

00:23:55

Christiane: Yes, exactly. Okay, perfect. Now it's better.

00:23:58

Carlotta: Exactly. Then we can just start the third part with a general question: What does it mean to you to be personally free? So not depending on social principles or something, but just for you personally?

00:24:15

Christiane: For me, being personally free means that I make my own decisions and that I determine what my life looks like and that I am not determined by others. And of course, as I just said, it can't be independent of others. I am always determined by others, because I am also dependent on others and others are dependent on me. But how can I organize a society in such a way that within the framework it sets, and every freedom must have a framework, even if it is only the natural framework, I can really freely shape my own life within this framework. Within limits, but without limits there is no freedom. If now everything is possible and natural laws were suspended, then freedom would be so great again, that it would be arbitrary again.

00:25:13

Carlotta: Can you tell me a moment in your life when you felt totally free? So a moment when you thought "Wow, now I'm really free". And can you remember why you felt like that?

00:25:36

Christiane: Well, I don't remember really feeling that free. I can remember feeling good and completely at peace with myself and the situation and just happy. I can say that. Free is a bit abstract for me, because as long as we live in this society where it's not even clear whether our children will survive reasonably, freedom is somehow something that doesn't even beckon on the horizon. So happy. Yes, actually often in times when I was out in the fresh air a lot. When I'm exhausted and with people I like and afterwards I sit there and enjoy the end of the day or something like that. So the whole day I was in the riding stable, painting obstacles, mucking out horse stalls, totally exhausted, forgetting to eat, forgetting everything, but then in the evening sitting with the others on the bales of straw, so physically exhausted or happy.

00:26:38

Carlotta: Yes, but not necessarily free, right?

00:26:39

Christiane: Yes free, what is free? Well, I don't know if I've ever felt free. Can we feel free at all in this society? I don't know.

00:26:51

Christiane: One more thing: which was also freedom for me. It was also maybe a bit of a conflict with the parents. They were so happy when I got the job as an editor at Deutsche Welle at the end of my 20's. But then I just quit and said "Yes well, I'll go to Dubai and get married". My parents had a heart attack. And I just said, "Yes, what is all this education for if it makes me unfree and I have to cling to a job all my life, just out of a need for security. That's not freedom." That was the only time when the concept of freedom was really clear to me. I want to be free to come and go and look for something new if I want to. I don't have to be stuck somewhere. Yes, that was freedom for me. But other than that, I can't think of anything.

00:27:40

Carlotta: And then I have another question, about your socialization and how you yourself learned about the concept of freedom, as a teenager or as a child. Can you remember how, for example, the teachers or your parents talked to you about freedom at school? Was it ever a topic? Or how was it dealt with?

00:28:14

Christiane: Well, what I always remember is that when I was still relatively small, about 6 or 7 or so, my mother used to say stupid things. Like: Be glad that you don't have to live in the GDR. And she always painted the GDR as a horror. She said it would be so unfree, everyone would be so poor. I always said, "But everyone's the same there. That's something beautiful. And then she said, "Yes, everyone is equally poor. I just answered: "But they all have enough to eat, don't they?" Then my mother said, "Yes". And that was always the point where I thought, "That's funny, we can't find anything together here. For her it was unfree and for me it was just different. But at school. I have to say that freedom was never really an issue for me. Yes, I never dealt with it that much. I also studied philosophy. Wait, did I ever have anything to do with freedom? Kant, Hegel. No, not really. As I said, freedom never exists in a vacuum, there are always things that limit freedom. I think the best way is to find these limits. To see how I as a society, how I as a society limit the freedoms in such a clever way that in our situation here on this planet

Earth, as human beings, the best possible freedom comes out for everyone. And that also in the long term.

00:30:04

Carlotta: Did you perhaps also hear in your studies about the concept of freedom in the market? Or this idea that you need a free market so that people are free.

00:30:17

Christiane: Oh, the free market, I've never associated it with freedom, the free market. It has the word free in it, but the free market is basically a fantasy, because there are always regulations. It is never completely free. And if it were completely free, then the law of the strongest would apply. Yes, well, it's called free, but I've never associated that with freedom.

00:30:49

Carlotta: And then I have one last question about society as a whole. If you look at the whole society: What do we need to be really free? What are the preconditions for freedom?

00:31:12

Christiane: Well, what is a very important prerequisite for freedom is first of all that the basic biological needs are satisfied and that the existence is also secured in the long term. Of course, there is never a guarantee, but that one lives in a world where one knows that in all probability I will be able to live all my life and also have enough to eat and will not be killed by any enemy troops or perpetrators of violence. So peace and livelihood security. I mean, if I have to fight for my survival or my food every day, then there's not much freedom. All the potential you have then goes into this daily struggle for existence. The moment your livelihood is secured and it's clear that you have a roof over your head and food, and it's likely to stay that way, then I can start looking: What do I want beyond that? How do I want to live at all? And how do I want to live with others? How would they like to live? How can I perhaps come to an agreement with them that we can live together? And that's where the exciting part begins, shaping society. Exactly, freedom is also the freedom to shape society. I would also add that.

00:32:36

Carlotta: Yes, and to what extent do you have to be free from having an idea imposed on you by others? Is that also something that could limit freedom?

00:33:04

Christiane: Yes, of course! So if people tell me "You have to work as an accountant now". That would be stupid. Of course, it's about shaping your own life and deciding for yourself what you want and what you don't want. But that is always within a framework. Yes, the framework must be realistic and must also be in harmony with the circumstances and the natural conditions and also with the needs of others.

00:33:44

Carlotta: Okay, great, thank you. Then I already have all the answers to all my questions. Thank you!