

16. The Fiction of Growth: Degrowth as Philosophical Critique of Economic Reality

*Lukasz Chrynowicz, lukasz.chrynowicz@protonmail.com
(Doctoral Candidate, PhD Program in Philosophy Taught
in English, University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski")*

Abstract: Economic growth is often presented as a neutral fact. Governments announce rising GDP as proof of their success, and the media often repeat these figures as signs of progress. Philosophy suggests otherwise. Growth works less as a description of reality and more as an idea that guides collective imagination and shapes our everyday expectations.

Kant described regulative ideas as concepts that do not mirror the world directly but help reason organize experience. Growth might be read in this way as a horizon that gives direction to public policy and social behavior. Vaihinger sharpened this view with his notion of fictionalism. He showed how abstractions function through deliberate omission, allowing a complex phenomenon to be reduced to a manageable symbol. Thus, economic indicators operate in this fashion. They simplify social life into numbers that appear objective, even when they mask existing struggles within households.

Cassirer added a symbolic dimension to this account. He argued that myths carry their own necessity and reality. Growth works as such a myth. Rising GDP is considered a symbol of prosperity, even when national wages stagnate. This legitimizes existing institutions and sustains confidence in the future. Ricoeur extended this line of thought by showing how narrative connects time with action. Such a constructed narrative convinces citizens that the nation is moving forward.

These perspectives suggest that growth is less a description of the economic life cycle and more aptly labeled a fiction that organizes collective meaning. However, it does not oppose reality. It provides a background through which societies interpret events and coordinate their actions. Such narratives and symbols transform isolated experiences into patterns that feel coherent. Institutions rely on them to justify decision-making and secure legitimacy.

This paper's aim is to set the stage for a philosophical reading of

growth. It shows how symbolic forms sustain the authority of economic measures and how ideology reinforces their hold on social imagination. Additionally, it examines this dynamic and considers how degrowth might challenge this fiction of growth.

Keywords: Fiction, Growth, Ideology, Degrowth, Deconstruction, Value

I. Introduction: Fiction as a Philosophical Tool

The idea of economic growth as a “regulative fiction” appeals to a broad philosophical tradition that questions the supposed empirical objectivity of key societal constructs. Rather than neutral descriptions of reality, these constructs appear as necessary illusions. They allow people to act and think together in ways that sustain collective action through mutual understanding. The context begins with Kant’s transcendental idealism, where regulative ideas mark the limits of empirical knowledge and guide reason beyond what can be known. Later, Vaihinger refined this view through his fictionalism by stressing the pragmatic use of deliberate abstractions. Cassirer added a symbolic dimension, while Ricoeur emphasized narrative. Together, these perspectives suggest that modern political economy rests on organizing principles created out of practical necessity rather than descriptive truths. Nevertheless, such principles do not mirror reality directly; they work symbolically in helping societies coordinate shared expectations and meanings.

Immanuel Kant, in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), distinguished two kinds of ideas. Some constitute objects of possible experience, while others regulate reason itself. The first mark the boundaries of knowledge. The second reach beyond empirical cognition. They do not describe reality but guide thought toward unity and completeness. Such ideas, including the philosophical concept of the unconditioned, allow thought to expand “out beyond the boundaries of all possible experience, even though only in a practical referral.”¹ Kant denied speculative reason the capacity for supersensible knowledge. Yet this denial opened space for expansion. The Idea, such as that of Wisdom (*Weisheit*), serves as a “necessary unity of all possible ends.”² It functions as

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 54.

² Ibid., 518.

a *focus imaginarius*³—a point toward which all observations tend, though it lies beyond the boundaries of experience. Economic growth, understood in Kantian terms, is a regulative fiction. It is not a direct reflection of reality but a symbolic horizon that organizes social behavior and shapes collective expectations. Its authority comes from its capacity to structure collective action, not from existing empirical truth.

Vaihinger identified many constructs as abstractive (neglective) fictions, which achieve their functional power through the “deliberate omission of certain elements of reality in complicated phenomena.”⁴ It is worth noting that Adam Smith’s political economy illustrates this paradox well, abstracting the system in order to deduce fundamental social laws.⁵ Economic indicators work in a similar way, serving as symbolic tools that simplify complex social processes into a “synthetic” metric. We must bear in mind, however, that they are not natural facts. Rather, they function as constructs that allow data to be set and manipulated effectively. This way of thinking is expressed in language through the “as if” formula, which states that reality is compared to “something whose impossibility and unreality is at the same time admitted.”⁶ This conscious falsity does not deceive; it works as a pragmatic necessity. Vaihinger noted that categories themselves (such as substance or cause) are fundamentally “analogies” and fictions invented by thought “to bring order into the mass of sensations and to give us the illusion of being able to understand and explain.”⁷

While Vaihinger dealt mainly with the logical side of utility, other scholars such as Ernst Cassirer and Paul Ricoeur stressed the cultural dimension of these fictions. They showed how collective imagination and ideas of progress are shaped.

Ernst Cassirer, in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1925), argued that myth is an “independent configuration of man’s consciousness”⁸ and expresses an “original direction of the human spirit.”⁹ It car-

³ Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As If’*, London: Routledge, 2009 (first published 1911), 273.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vols. I–III, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, 335.

⁹ *Ibid.*

ries its “own mode of necessity”¹⁰ and, consequently, its “own mode of reality.”¹¹ The objectivity of such forms is understood in a functional sense. Economic growth, seen as a myth of prosperity, operates as a modern symbolic form that organizes collective experience. For instance, rising GDP figures are presented as proof of national success, even when everyday life remains unchanged for most citizens. Such examples show that growth serves a political role, legitimizing policy through symbols rather than through genuine improvement. Growth figures may expand through real estate speculation while ordinary families struggle to afford housing. Another irony appears when luxury shopping malls boost consumption figures. Here, the statistics suggest an increase in prosperity, yet many people still cannot afford to shop there or even buy simple new clothes elsewhere.

Extending this line of thought, Paul Ricoeur shows how symbolism connects time with narrative. He calls “emplotment” (*muthos*)¹² a “poetic making of something”¹³ that answers the aporias of time. For him, emplotment is a kind of creative imitation. Narratives shape expectations, as he writes, “always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms.”¹⁴ Fictions of progress gain their force through metaphorical reference, not through direct description. They release a “radical power of reference to those aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be talked about directly.”¹⁵ For example, when a government announces a new highway project, it is not merely about the use of materials such as asphalt and concrete. Instead, it becomes part of a larger story of modernization or progress.¹⁶ The aim is to convince citizens that the nation is moving forward toward a brighter future. Even though drivers con-

¹⁰ Ibid., 441.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. I, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 277.

¹³ Ibid., 273.

¹⁴ Ibid., 294.

¹⁵ Ibid., 302.

¹⁶ The Economist Impact, *Infrastructure for Good. Building for a Better World: Key Findings Report*, London: The Economist Group, 2021, https://impact.economist.com/projects/infrastructure-for-good/TEI_Deloitte_Infrastructure_for_Good_Key_Findings_Report.pdf

tinue to spend long hours in traffic¹⁷, the narrative itself shapes how people perceive the future. Nevertheless, highways do not fully embody the ideal of progress, because owning a car still requires significant expense for fuel, insurance, and maintenance.¹⁸ Moreover, more roads mean increased harmful gas emissions into the atmosphere.¹⁹ This leads to additional environmental costs, which complicate the narrative of national prosperity associated with such projects.

All these thinkers show that fiction is not opposed to reality but is a way of working with it. Fictional structures help societies interpret reality and act collectively. Narratives and symbols transform events into patterns that feel coherent. Through them, institutions find a language to explain and defend their decisions, even when those choices are neither just nor necessary.

II. Growth as Ideological Fiction

As already mentioned in this paper, economic growth is often treated by many as a neutral indicator of national well-being. Governments publish GDP data every quarter.²⁰ National central banks (such as the Federal Reserve²¹) raise interest rates in response to projected forecasts. Media coverage of fluctuations in various indicators—often abstract to many

¹⁷ Benjamin Seibold, “*The Ripple Effect of Bad Driving*,” The New York Times, August 26, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/08/26/redefining-bumper-to-bumper/the-ripple-effect-of-bad-driving>

¹⁸ Marc Fisher, “*America’s Fading Car Culture*,” The Washington Post, September 2, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/style/2015/09/02/americas-fading-car-culture/>.

¹⁹ Lombard Odier, *Building Trouble: How Global Road Projects Threaten Climate Targets*, Geneva: Lombard Odier, 2025, <https://www.lombardodier.com/insights/2025/september/building-trouble.html>.

²⁰ Statistics Poland, *Quarterly National Accounts: Updated GDP Estimates*, Warsaw: Statistics Poland, 2024, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/national-accounts/quarterly-national-accounts/information-of-statistics-poland-on-the-updated-quarterly-gdp-estimate-for-1-4-quarter-1995-2023-and-1-2-quarter-2024,5,14.html>.

²¹ Federal Reserve, *FOMC Projections Materials*, Washington, D.C.: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, September 18, 2024, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/fomcprojtab120240918.htm>

citizens—is widely broadcast as a manifestation of national prosperity.²² At the same time, these actions serve as exemplifications of national pride, shaping the hearts and minds of citizens. From a philosophical perspective, however, growth is not an ontological fact but a narrative that societies tell about themselves.

Building on this, Louis Althusser's theory of ideology provides an additional perspective for examining the cultural authority of economic growth. In his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser asserts: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."²³ This formulation shows that ideology goes beyond simple error. It provides a structure through which people interpret their lives and act within society, even if it conceals the fact that social arrangements are conditional and constructed.

Poland can serve as a striking example. The state allocates nearly five percent of GDP to finance defense and even plans to increase this share further.²⁴ Thus, the state presents military strength as a source of national pride. At the same time, the healthcare system remains underfunded and overburdened.²⁵ Patients often wait many years for basic medical procedures, while hospitals struggle to secure resources for effective treatment. Wealthier citizens can pay for private care, but poorer ones often do not live long enough to see their scheduled operations. Hospitals that provide care beyond official "limits" are forced to take commercial loans that are not later reimbursed from the public budget, even though they should be. Many eventually face bankruptcy.²⁶ Thus, the official narrative of security and progress conceals how fragile wel-

²² Alex Eriksson & Hannah Göransson, *From Headlines to Expectations: The Impact of Economic Media Coverage on Inflation Expectations*, Jönköping University, Bachelor Thesis in Economics, 2024, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1863182/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

²³ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, 202.

²⁴ Polskie Radio, "Poland to spend 4.7% of GDP on defense in 2025: deputy PM," October 4, 2024, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/Artykul/3432045,poland-to-spend-47-of-gdp-on-defense-in-2025-deputy-pm>.

²⁵ Poland Insight, "Hospitals in Poland Facing Dire Financial Situation due to Rising Costs and Lack of Valuation Adjustments," January 2, 2024, <https://polandinsight.com/hospitals-in-poland-facing-dire-financial-situation-due-to-rising-costs-and-lack-of-valuation-adjustments-32671/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

fare institutions are in Poland. Symbols of strength project stability, yet they mask the compromises shaping social life.

Furthermore, Althusser notes that “The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production.”²⁷ He further explains:

The tenacious obviousnesses... are so integrated into our everyday “consciousness” that it is extremely hard, not to say almost impossible, to raise oneself to the point of view of reproduction.²⁸

What follows from Althusser’s insight is relatively simple. Growth is never merely a technical measure. It functions as ideology, making certain choices appear natural. In Poland, the expansion of consumer markets is celebrated as progress, while the deterioration of public health-care remains largely invisible.²⁹ Reproduction occurs when conditional political decisions are absorbed into everyday assumptions and presented to the public as obligations.

When read in the context of economic growth, Althusser’s argument shows that growth is not a purely technical objective. Poland’s trajectory of economic transformation after 1989 illustrates this dynamic. Although these reforms were praised by economists such as Jeffrey Sachs as technical modernization³⁰, they produced mass unemployment and significant social insecurity.³¹ Later, Poland’s accession to the European Union, along with other Eastern European countries, was presented by ruling elites as a sign of great progress. However, for many families, migration abroad in search of employment became the most

²⁷ Louis Althusser, “*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*,” 174.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁹ Poland Insight, “*Hospitals in Poland Facing Dire...*”

³⁰ Jeffrey Sachs, *Building a Market Economy in Poland*, Scientific American, March 1992, https://www.earth.columbia.edu/sitefiles/file/Sachs%20Writing/1992/ScientificAmerican_1992_BuildingaMarketEconomyinPoland_March1992.PDF.

³¹ Michał Myck & Monika Oczkowska, “*Shocked by Therapy? Unemployment in the First Years of the Socio-Economic Transition in Poland and Its Long-Term Consequences*,” CenEA Working Paper, 2017, <https://cenea.org.pl/pl/2017/01/06/shocked-by-therapy-unemployment-in-the-first-years-of-the-socio-economic-transition-in-poland-and-its-long-term-consequences/>.

tangible outcome.³² What appeared as neutral economic growth was in fact the reproduction of specific priorities and social costs concealed behind the rhetoric of progress.

This mechanism is central to ideology's operation. As Althusser observed: "Ideology never says, 'I am ideological.'"³³ It works silently, imposing what appear to be self-evident truths: "It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes... obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize."³⁴

Seen in this light, economic growth functions ideologically through what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). As he writes: "It is the latter [ISAs] which largely secure the reproduction specifically of the relations of production, behind a 'shield' provided by the repressive State apparatus."³⁵ Growth is reproduced in schools, in the media, in political rhetoric, and even in scientific discourse. Among these, the educational apparatus plays a decisive role in mature capitalism by transmitting norms and legitimizing existing hierarchies. This is visible in curricula that highlight competitiveness and innovation, reward measurable improvement, and establish routines in the classroom that link achievement with constant progress. Students learn to associate success with productivity and expansion, while stability or redistribution are framed as signs of weakness. In this way, education does not simply transmit skills; it cultivates a mindset in which growth appears natural.³⁶ Moreover, this occurs not only through the transmission of skills but also through the instilling of obedience, as Althusser explains:

"It is by an apprenticeship in a variety of know-how wrapped up in the massive inculcation of the ideology of the ruling class that the relations of production in a capitalist social formation... are largely reproduced."³⁷

³² Jan Hagemeyer & Jan Jakub Michałek, "The Long-Term Effects of Poland's Accession to the European Union: A Literature Review," *Studia Europejskie*, 2024, https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.ojs-doi-10_33067_SE_2_2024_5/c/articles-53678829.pdf.

³³ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and...", 218.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁶ Chris Rolph, "Neoliberal metrics and a curriculum for competence," BERA Blog, March 14, 2025, <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/neoliberal-metrics-and-a-curriculum-for-competence>

³⁷ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and...", 180.

The consequence of this process is the formation of subjects who participate in their own subordination to the logic of expansion. This occurs through interpellation, in which, as Althusser explains, “The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject...”³⁸ Most people, once constituted as subjects through this process, “‘work,’ they ‘work by themselves’”³⁹ to sustain the existing order. We see this in everyday life, especially when citizens take satisfaction in GDP increases as collective success, even while struggling with personal debt or unstable employment conditions.⁴⁰ In this way, alternatives such as degrowth or redistribution are depoliticized. They come to appear as unthinkable or extreme ideas, largely because the ideology of growth presents itself as the only rational horizon of collective progress. This is how the system secures the “reproduction of the relations of production.”⁴¹

In this regard, Gross Domestic Product is far from neutral. It counts certain activities, such as market production and consumption, while leaving other economic activities outside its scope. From this perspective, Marilyn Waring argued in *If Women Counted* (1990) that national accounting methods have historically reflected male priorities by treating women’s contributions as invisible or secondary. In this way, the growth indicator signals what matters and what does not. The figure becomes a symbol, and the symbol becomes a target. This target shapes policy, behavior, and collective imagination; as such, it is not harmless. For example, women’s unpaid labor caring for children and the elderly is not counted in GDP measurements.⁴² For policymakers, it is treated as a natural condition of life and is not recognized within formal economic calculations, even though without such labor the economy would collapse. As Waring writes, “No one, it seems, is re-

³⁸ Ibid., 221.

³⁹ Ibid., 222.

⁴⁰ World Economic Forum, “*As reality and perception clash, how is the economy really doing?*” April 22, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/04/how-can-we-bridge-the-gap-between-economic-fact-and-economic-sentiment-a-new-report-sheds-light/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Anna Fälth and Mark Blackden, “*Unpaid Care Work: Gender Equality and Poverty Reduction*,” UNDP Policy Brief 01, New York: United Nations Development Programme, October 2009, <https://www.weps.org/sites/default/files/media/Unpaid%20care%20work%20English.pdf>

sponsible for the dismal state of economics.”⁴³

In his 1992 review of Waring’s *If Women Counted* for the *Review of Income and Wealth*, Harry H. Postner extends her critique by situating GDP within the technical framework of the United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA). He argues that the exclusion of household labor and ecological costs is built into the system itself, which recognizes only monetized exchange and state productivity as economically meaningful.⁴⁴ Building on this, Postner emphasizes that disregarding such labor has political consequences. It renders women’s everyday contributions invisible and helps maintain social hierarchies. He even remarks that Waring’s call to measure nonmarket household labor is “entirely on the right track.”⁴⁵ Here, Althusser’s theory of ideology again becomes relevant. As Postner suggests, the technical language of national accounting conceals normative assumptions behind a façade of objectivity: “The ‘forced consistency’ elements that permeate the publicly available national accounts are at ‘odds’ with economic behaviour.”⁴⁶

The idea that economic growth functions as a socially effective fiction becomes clearer in the postmodern critiques of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. Lyotard situates growth within the political mechanics of legitimation, while Baudrillard shows how the signs of growth—economic statistics above all—detach from reality and become part of a self-sustaining hyperreal system.

In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard argued that modernity depends on overarching explanatory principles, which he called “grand narratives.”⁴⁷ These narratives legitimize knowledge as well as power. They promise a vision of progress and continuous expansion as a blueprint for the universal future. Because economic growth promises prosperity, it serves as a clear example: it helps institutions justify themselves and strengthens their projection of political authority. Nonetheless, Lyotard warned that such narratives simplify reality by imposing a

⁴³ Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, New York: Harper & Row, 1988, 92.

⁴⁴ Harry H. Postner, “Review of *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* by Marilyn Waring,” *Review of Income and Wealth* 38, no. 2 (1992): 238.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁴⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979, 31-37.

single model of progress while excluding alternative paths of development. In his view, the state relies on grand narratives such as economic growth to secure legitimacy. Growth figures reassure citizens that progress is being made. As a result, citizens are discouraged from questioning the role of the state itself.⁴⁸ Without such narratives, institutional authority would be far more fragile. What grants growth its authority is not universal truth but its function as a social instrument: “A narrative is not merely a story; it is a mechanism of legitimation.”⁴⁹

From Lyotard’s fragmentation of narrative we move to Baudrillard’s dissolution of reality itself. Baudrillard traces how late capitalism shifted from ideology (which conceals reality) to simulation (which abolishes the reality principle altogether).⁵⁰ Economic statistics and forecasting instruments no longer measure reality; they generate it. This is the “precession of simulacra,”⁵¹ in which the model precedes the territory: “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”⁵² Indices such as GDP or employment rates are no longer neutral quantities. They sever their link to lived reality and then present themselves as simple signs that claim to represent the real while in fact constructing their own self-referential world. As Baudrillard writes, this involves “all the signs of the real and short-circuiting all its vicissitudes.”⁵³

In this light, power’s strategy becomes a constant reinjection of “the real.” As he observes:

“The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defecation, is to reinject the real and the referential everywhere, to persuade us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production.”⁵⁴

The obsession with growth figures and crises thus becomes a way of sustaining a fading sense of reality, while the flood of statistics deepens

⁴⁸ Tim Besley, Chris Dann, Sacha Dray, “*The global growth slowdown is bad news for trust in government*,” CEPR VoxEU, April 16, 2025, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/global-growth-slowdown-bad-news-trust-government>

⁴⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*..., 116.

⁵⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

the collapse of meaning in the media, producing “more and more information, and less and less meaning.”⁵⁵

Both Lyotard and Baudrillard show that economic growth functions as a social fiction. Growth is not a simple lie but a symbolic framework that shapes social perception and action. Its effectiveness lies precisely in the fact that it no longer depends directly on empirical reality.

III. Degrowth as Philosophical Deconstruction

When we deliberate about degrowth, several questions arise. How does degrowth challenge the idea that economic growth is natural and inevitable? Does it simply reject development, or does it dismantle the ideological narratives and institutions that sustain the growth paradigm? Finally, can degrowth open space for new ways of imagining prosperity?

In this regard, Serge Latouche describes economic growth as a kind of secular religion. This belief is deeply present in modern societies. It is repeated with a kind of ritual confidence, treated as natural and unquestionable. Latouche argues that this principle is not based on empirical necessity but on ideology. In his view, growth is more a metaphysical narrative than an economic measure. This symbolic order gives meaning and legitimacy to modern institutions. Therefore, he questions economic rationality itself when he compares this position to atheism:

Strictly speaking, we should be talking at the theoretical level of “a-growth,” in the sense in which we speak of “a-theism,” rather than “de-growth.” And we do indeed have to abandon a faith or a religion—that of the economy, progress and development—and reject the irrational and quasi-idolatrous cult of growth for growth’s sake.⁵⁶

Hence, degrowth is not merely another dogma within the same structure. It is a breakdown in meaning—a refusal to treat GDP as a sacred totem. In this sense, degrowth acts like a philosophical deconstruction. It dismantles the symbols and institutions that sustain the fiction of progress. For example, when some governments acclaim rising car sales as proof of prosperity, degrowth asks whether more vehicles really mean a better life for people, or whether they simply lock society into a trap of pollution and dependence on fossil fuels.

Furthermore, Jason Hickel advances the critique of economic

⁵⁵ Ibid., 329.

⁵⁶ Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 82.

growth by comparing it to a biological error—an example of cancer on the social body. In nature, growth has a purpose: it helps organisms develop, repair organs, or heal wounds, and then it stops. By contrast, capitalist economies chase growth as an end in itself. Growth becomes detached from ecological limits and human needs. As Hickel explains, capitalism differs because:

What makes capitalism different from most other economic systems in history is that it's organised around the imperative of constant expansion, or "growth": ever-increasing levels of industrial extraction, production and consumption, which we measure as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). [...] When growth fails to stop—when cells keep replicating just for the sake of it—it's because of a coding error, like what happens with cancer. This kind of growth quickly becomes deadly.⁵⁷

This unrestrained expansion consumes resources without limit and, in doing so, weakens the very systems on which it depends. Hickel's argument is ontological in nature, not merely moral or political. He questions the basic assumptions of modern economics by asking whether the pursuit of "more" can truly be called progress. In his view, the growth paradigm defines wealth as accumulation and simultaneously produces scarcity in order to keep itself moving.⁵⁸ The result is a situation in which the system turns existence into a commodity. This weakens social bonds and drives ecological decline.

A good example is the fast-fashion industry. It produces ever more clothing under the sign of abundance ("take, make, dispose").⁵⁹ Yet this excess creates scarcity elsewhere: it drains water supplies in India⁶⁰, exploits cheap labor in Bangladesh⁶¹, and generates waste that is often exported to African countries and treated as a commodity⁶², only to be

⁵⁷ Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, London: Penguin Books, 2020, 142.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁹ Fashion Revolution, "Overcoming Overproduction," 2023, <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/overcoming-overproduction/>.

⁶⁰ Earth.Org, "Fast Fashion and Its Environmental Impact in 2025," May 2025, <https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/>.

⁶¹ Textile Learner, "Fast Fashion's Global Impact on Child Labor Exploitation and Environmental Costs," September 10, 2024, <https://textilelearner.net/fast-fashions-global-impact-on-child-labor-exploitation-and-environmental-costs/>.

⁶² Nature, "How Africa wears the cost of unwanted fast fashion," July 4, 2025, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d44148-025-00203-4>.

stockpiled indefinitely. Meanwhile, the clothes themselves are often of poor quality, designed to fall apart after a few months. This leads consumers to dispose of them quickly (as the term “fast” suggests), and corporations pressure consumers to buy more, and more often. In this way, wealth is staged while the engine of growth continues. Corporations capture profits, while the social and environmental costs of these operations fall on states and ordinary people. In the end, we pay for those costs through taxes—not only directly, but also by financing the regeneration of ecosystems and local communities damaged by such activities.⁶³

The critique of economic expansion—sometimes called a regulative fiction or a symbolic construct—also appears in the work of other scholars. Two are especially important here: Ivan Illich and André Gorz. Illich and Gorz show that the pursuit of growth reduces autonomy and reshapes work.⁶⁴ It strips people of skills and of time that is genuinely their own. For them, degrowth is a project of regaining control and rebuilding collective life.

Ivan Illich, in *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), argued that industrial systems—whether owned by individuals, corporations, or the state—undermine human autonomy. He described two “watersheds”⁶⁵ in the history of tools. At first, science increases efficiency and human capability. But once an enterprise grows beyond a certain point, it “frustrates the end for which it was originally designed, and then rapidly becomes a threat to society itself.”⁶⁶ Tools that exceed human control turn into instruments of domination. Illich’s alternative vision is “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment.”⁶⁷ The industrial mode of production does the opposite: it reduces persons to “mere consumers”⁶⁸ as machines gain power.⁶⁹ This domination is enforced through what Illich called “radical

⁶³ S&P Global Sustainable1, “Unpriced Environmental Costs: The Top Externalities of the Global Market,” July 2, 2024, <https://www.spglobal.com/sustainable/en/insights/blogs/unpriced-environmental-costs-the-top-externalities-of-the-global-market>

⁶⁴ Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, 340.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

monopoly.”⁷⁰ It arises when an industrial process takes exclusive control over meeting a basic need, excluding nonindustrial alternatives. Motor traffic creates such a monopoly by limiting the freedom to walk or cycle, making space scarce, and privileging vehicles. Such monopoly imposes compulsory consumption and restricts human autonomy.⁷¹ Therefore, Illich warned that people lose self-reliance when they surrender their “native capacity for healing, consoling, moving, learning, building their houses, and burying their dead”⁷² in exchange for professional services.

André Gorz extended this critique by showing how growth depends on inventing artificial needs and producing consumers for profitable commodities. Capitalism is no longer driven by basic needs but by the creation of a “subject for the object”⁷³, generating rising social costs. Gorz distinguished heteronomous work from autonomous activity.⁷⁴ Heteronomous work is activity whose “form and content are determined by technical imperatives independent of all individual choice and interpretation.”⁷⁵ It is the outcome of specialization and large-scale interdependence—a system that functions like “a single, giant machine.”⁷⁶ Although technology reduces the amount of labor required, capitalist structures preserve full-time paid work as the norm. This is a political measure that sustains domination, since dependence on the employer “comes to dominate their lives.”⁷⁷ For Gorz, immersion in heteronomous work is alienating because it entails an “absence of individual control over the kinds of skill required and the overall purpose of collective work.”⁷⁸

Together, both thinkers argue that unlimited growth takes over technology and work alike. Illich applies this critique to institutions such

⁷⁰ Ibid., 375.

⁷¹ Brett J. M. Petzer, Anna J. Wieczorek & Geert P. J. Verbong, “*The legal street: a scarcity approach to urban open space in mobility transitions*,” *Urban Transformations*, Vol. 3, Article 3, 2021, <https://urbantransformations.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s42854-021-00018-0>

⁷² Ivan Illich, *Tools for....*, 383.

⁷³ André Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*, London: Pluto Press, 1985, 51.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 51.

as schools and hospitals, which often create dependency instead of autonomy. For Gorz, moving beyond capitalism requires breaking the dominance of commodity relations, thereby reclaiming the value of people's own activities. On this view, degrowth is not about living with less. It is about freeing time and restoring human autonomy. A society built on this principle would locate wealth in time people genuinely possess: time spent learning, deepening friendship, or cultivating creativity. Thus, degrowth would be a way of reclaiming freedom, not a simple economic fix.

IV. Economic Ontology and the Fiction of Value

The degrowth movement calls for a philosophical reexamination of the economy at its foundations. Categories such as growth, debt, money, and productivity shape reality, not the other way around. They determine what is counted, what is pursued, and what becomes central in social debate. However, these categories are not neutral. They set the horizon of collective existence and often register illness or ecological damage as if they were prosperity. Degrowth challenges this fiction and asks how wealth might be imagined in terms of autonomy.

Karl Marx argued that economic categories are historical in nature. In *Capital* he wrote: "Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values."⁷⁹ Value comes into being through labor and exchange. The energy of labor is absorbed by capital and then appears in mystified form. This process reaches into everyday life. Wages and prices rest on a shared belief that value is real, even when that belief conceals social conflict or ecological damage. A clear example can be found in the pharmaceutical industry. Rising sales increase GDP, but they also indicate the expansion of chronic illness and the pressure placed on health systems. Moreover, Marx and later Lazzarato show how these categories sustain capitalism by turning social problems into profit. Degrowth continues this critique. It questions the dominance of abstract value in contemporary discourse and opens the way to imagine wealth in terms of healthy social relations grounded in mutual responsibility.

Georg Simmel deepened the critique of value by showing how money makes abstraction absolute. In *The Philosophy of Money* he de-

⁷⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin Classics, 1990, 61.

scribed it as “value turned into a substance, the value of things without the things themselves.”⁸⁰ Money enables exchange, but it also detaches value from qualitative experience. It reduces differences to quantities.⁸¹ In this way, money enforces constant calculation and gives priority to objective culture over lived experience.⁸² It creates distance from existence itself, as individuals are forced to step back from things and see them as objects. Simmel’s analysis shows that the modern money economy is a cultural system, not merely a technical instrument.⁸³ It shapes how people understand themselves and how they relate to the external world.⁸⁴ Degrowth resists this tendency by restoring value to social practice as part of ordinary life. It highlights care and insists that real value belongs to social relations free from abstract calculation.

Moving from Marx to Simmel opens space to elaborate the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari. Their critique moves from abstraction to the dynamics of desire. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), they describe capitalism as a machine of deterritorialization.⁸⁵ In their view, desire is a productive force.⁸⁶ Capitalism decodes flows of labor and money and then reterritorializes them through abstract quantities.⁸⁷ At the same time, it arrests this movement by imposing new orders such as the state or the family.⁸⁸ In this context, scarcity is produced even in times of abundance by binding desire into dependence. But scarcity is not a natural condition. Degrowth intervenes by reclaiming desire as something that cannot be reduced to consumption or demand.

Lazzarato brings this issue into the critique of neoliberal ideology by exposing the mechanisms through which debt shapes subjectivity. In

⁸⁰ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, London: Routledge, 2004, 118.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 448.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 473.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁴ Caroline Henchoz, Tristan Coste & Boris Wernli, “Culture, money attitudes and economic outcomes,” *Swiss Journal of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 155, Article 2, 2019, <https://sjes.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41937-019-0028-4>.

⁸⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 22.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

The Making of the Indebted Man (2012), Lazzarato shows that debt produces the “indebted man,”⁸⁹ whose future is scripted by obligation. Debt forces individuals to treat insecurity as an enterprise. It seizes time in advance, as individuals desperately search for options to repay debt.⁹⁰ In this way, debt binds individuals to obligations that determine their future before it arrives.⁹¹ Debt becomes an economy of time⁹², claiming the future in advance and subordinating personal choices to the reproduction of capitalist power.⁹³

The student loan system in the United States illustrates this dynamic. A cruel paradox emerges: a year spent at university in pursuit of knowledge can end in a decade of repayment.⁹⁴ Many graduates cannot find work in their field and take low-paid jobs in which their knowledge remains unused.⁹⁵ Yet the loan remains for years. High interest rates make installments difficult to maintain—sometimes even higher than monthly income. The pressure affects mental health, as repayment becomes a constant burden.⁹⁶ Debt thus becomes an economy of time, holding the future hostage. It forces choices that ultimately reproduce capitalist power. This is precisely why public financing of higher education in Europe must be preserved. It represents one of the highest achievements of our civilization, and we cannot allow capitalist logic to reshape it in the way it has been reshaped in the United States.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011, 146.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 182.

⁹¹ Ibid., 179-181.

⁹² Ibid., 182.

⁹³ Ibid., 186.

⁹⁴ Harvard Law School Center on the Legal Profession, “*Debt Takes a Toll*” (2023), <https://clp.law.harvard.edu/knowledge-hub/magazine/issues/student-debt/debt-takes-a-toll>.

⁹⁵ WorkRise Network, “*The Impact of Student Debt on the Low-Wage Workforce*” (2023), <https://www.workrisenetwork.org/working-knowledge/impact-student-debt-low-wage-workforce>.

⁹⁶ Right as Rain by UW Medicine, “*How Does Student Debt Impact Mental Health?*” (2023), <https://rightasrain.uwmedicine.org/mind/mental-health/student-loan-debt>.

⁹⁷ Philip G. Altbach, Hans de Wit, Ayenachew A. Woldegiyorgis, *Public vs. Private Participation in Higher Education: Realities and Debates*, Background Paper for the 2021/2 Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2021, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380071>.

Together, these perspectives form a continuous critique. Marx exposes the abstraction of value. Simmel shows how money detaches exchange from qualities. Deleuze and Guattari reveal the capture of desire. Lazzarato demonstrates the scripting of the future through debt. Each extends the previous, and the analysis develops progressively. Degrowth responds at this level by reshaping institutions and habits. It points toward forms of life in which value is experienced as autonomy, desire takes shape in social relations, and time is created together through collective practices. We can see this in community gardens or local cooperatives, where people share work and time together.

V. Fiction and Degrowth

To speak of degrowth philosophically is to ask how we act within the fictions that shape economic operations and how we might resist them. As we have seen in the preceding sections, growth is more than a policy goal or statistical measure. It functions as a fiction that structures reality. Degrowth does not erase this fiction. Instead, it takes a different approach, aiming to show that fiction can open onto a space of ethical and political choice. Degrowth does not erase this fiction; rather, it renders it contestable and opens it to ethical and political choice. This becomes visible in everyday practices, for example when an employer values employees' time more than factory output. Such moments show how degrowth enters daily life. In these small acts, the obsession with growth loses authority.

Hannah Arendt's distinction between fabrication and action helps to clarify what is really at stake. In *The Human Condition* she explains that fabrication produces objects and systems: "Work provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings."⁹⁸ Its condition is worldliness. By contrast, action is the only activity that takes place directly between people. Arendt stresses that action does not need mediation: "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter."⁹⁹ Action is unpredictable because "the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what

⁹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 286.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

is infinitely improbable.”¹⁰⁰ It corresponds to plurality, “to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”¹⁰¹

Degrowth belongs to this sphere. It does not appear as a technical fix or as a designed model of reform. Rather, it takes shape as action in Arendt’s sense, because it is a beginning that cannot be calculated: “something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.”¹⁰² Degrowth arises in the shared space between people who refuse the logic of necessity. In this refusal, Arendt’s definition of freedom becomes visible: “To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled.”¹⁰³ Seen this way, degrowth takes shape as a collective interruption. It marks the moment when the fiction of growth stops feeling natural and when imagination can move in a new direction. Its strength lies in action, not in a ready-made plan. Arendt warned against such designs: “To conceive of politics as making is to ignore human plurality in theory and to coerce individuals in practice.”¹⁰⁴ Degrowth appears here as a practice of freedom, resisting inevitability and allowing a new beginning. As Arendt wrote, “It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born.”¹⁰⁵ Degrowth appears here as a collective practice. It is visible in everyday actions that weaken the authority of growth and create room for freedom.

An equally important force is the ethical dimension that Jean-Luc Nancy develops in his ontology of being-with. In *Being Singular Plural* (2000) he argues that existence is always coexistence and that there is no being without relation. This insight challenges the usual view of the economy, which turns relationships into transactions and measures presence only by productivity. Nancy notes:

Curiously, what happens here may be the same as what happens in the economy: “subjects” of exchange are the most rigorously co-originary; and this mutual originarity vanishes in the unequal appropriation of exchange,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 270.

¹⁰² Ibid., 261.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 234.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 270.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 280.

such that this coexistence vanishes in a strong sense.¹⁰⁶

Degrowth resists this isolation by reclaiming the ontological fact of being-with. It is not a nostalgic return to community; it is a rethinking of what it means to inhabit a world that is always shared with others. As he writes, “The world is the coexistence that puts these existences together.”¹⁰⁷ From this perspective, degrowth rethinks economics through shared goods and cooperation, since prosperity rests in the relations that sustain life.

Nancy’s notion of being-with reframes degrowth as an ethical project, because “an ontology of being-with can only be both an ethos and a praxis, identically.”¹⁰⁸ Degrowth therefore cultivates forms of coexistence that resist commodification. To embrace it is to acknowledge that existence itself is plural, as Nancy insists: “Being is singularly plural and plurally singular.”¹⁰⁹ Shared life must acknowledge this fact, even if, as Nancy notes, it “vanishes at the same time that it is exposed.”¹¹⁰

VI. Conclusions

This article began with a question: what does it mean to treat economic growth as a fiction? The term does not point to falsehood. It names a symbolic construction that orders how we live in time and how we ascribe value. It also provides a framework for what counts as real. The analysis proceeded through a range of thinkers. Kant and Vaihinger showed growth’s regulative force. Cassirer and Ricoeur examined its reach through narrative and symbol. Althusser traced its role in reproducing ideology. Lyotard and Baudrillard pursued these themes into grand narrative and hyperreality. Together, these perspectives show that growth operates as a socially sustained fiction. It legitimizes institutions and directs a collective imagination that reinforces its dominance.

The critique then treated degrowth as a moment of reflection. Latouche spoke of growth as a secular religion. Hickel described it as pathological expansion. Illich and Gorz showed how growth penetrates individual autonomy and thereby reduces the capacity for self-

¹⁰⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 223.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 242.

determined action. Overall, their interpretations reshape the meaning of degrowth. It appears as a counter-fiction that rejects inevitability and opens space for imagination. Degrowth shows itself in everyday habits—for example, when neighbors share what they have with each other, or when a workplace values time over output. In these acts, growth loses authority, and freedom becomes part of ordinary life.

The ontological dimension showed that economic categories carry symbolic claims. Value, money, debt, and productivity do not function as neutral tools. Marx read value as a social relation. Simmel saw money as a form that creates distance from life. Deleuze and Guattari described capitalism as a machine that captures desire. Lazzarato argued that debt molds both subjectivity and futures. Degrowth responds to this ontology by returning value to lived experience. It seeks desire outside the closed cycle of consumption.

Finally, through Arendt and Nancy, degrowth may be understood as “action” and as “being-with.” It does not appear as a fixed model, because it takes shape only when people act together and remain open to one another. In this sense, degrowth is less a finished solution than a beginning. It invites critical engagement with the fictions that organize economic policy. At the same time, degrowth creates room for autonomy and for forms of life shaped by a mixture of imagination and coexistence.

Therefore, the conclusion does not resolve the tension between critique and construction, or between fiction and reality. Philosophy must keep this tension open. Degrowth, in philosophical terms, does not mean the end of growth, nor is it simply a new narrative. It questions the symbolic structures that sustain economic relationships and opens space for other interpretations. In this way, degrowth begins as an open path.