

Degrowth under discussion in the heart of the beast

An analysis of the main positions and interventions at the recent 'post-growth Woodstock' in the European Parliament

Juan Bordera

For three days, from 15 to 17 May, the European Parliament hosted a historic event. Some have called it the Woodstock of post-growth. [In the Beyond Growth conference series](#), organised by 18 MEPs of different colours, many of the world's best minds on the issue of degrowth/post-growth debated with some of the continent's leading politicians.

The first plenary was a taste of what was to come, of the fracture that is increasingly opening up between science and politics, a fracture between the irrefutable evidence of scientific urgency and the limits of the Union's realpolitik to achieve transformations that are not patches or, even worse, disguises. If you follow the story of what has happened, you will see that, despite everything and everyone, there is a way out for Europe and the rest of the world.

Parliament President Roberta Metsola and European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen were not cast as the bad guys in the film. They chose to play it. In front of a packed audience, and very much in favour of abandoning euphemisms - at least for three days - they decided to open the event with a big splash of cold water.



El antropólogo Jason Hickel, durante su intervención. / Santi Aguado

Metsola chose to defend the need to promote more growth at the opening of an event designed, at last, for the

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opposite. Von der Leyen was more adroit and at least conceded that "the fossil growth model is obsolete", evidencing the stratagem that many powerful people

will follow from now on, growth will be possible with renewables, carbon capture and sequestration and flying unicorns. In fact, it is the same strategy as the one that will be followed at [COP28, chaired by an oil sheikh](#). CO2 capture and sequestration, for the moment, is a resource sink that functions only [to capture and sequester public FON2](#) and as a front/cover to continue deceiving the public.

Fortunately, after Metsola and Von der Leyen, few other voices—all institutional and some outright booed—dared deny the obvious: the most crucial debate of the 21st century will be how to turn our economic systems into ones that do not need to grow. For a start, it will not be possible to do so for long, except at the cost of leaving more and more people out of the shrinking pie.

If there is one speech that explains perfectly - and in just ten minutes - why green growth is an impossible and undesirable oxymoron, it was [the second speech by Lund University economist Timothée Parrique](#). Metsola and Von der Leyen, to whom he indirectly appealed, must have had their ears pricked up.

But now, getting into the debate that really matters, how to manoeuvre concretely, I will try to draw a way out that

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can be gleaned by putting together some of the contributions. So, let's start with the first truism: that this is all about going after the mega-rich. Without aggressive redistribution policies, nothing can be done. Milena Buchs

argued for taxing wealth (stock) and not so much income (flow) to favour the system's transitional functioning. Simone D'Alessandro introduced another crucial issue: military spending. Every euro spent on increasing already bloated military budgets takes us further away from a coordinated solution to humanity's greatest challenge.

With these two issues alone, we would already have plenty of funds available to launch a programme as global as possible (although it could start with a European one) of reduced working hours, universal basic income, in cash, or universal basic services, in-kind (that is, guaranteeing the basics to everyone, and it seems obviously more useful in a context that may be heading towards inflation or even stagflation); and to put an end to this semi-magical trinomial - because let's face it, it's not going to be easy to achieve - emergency incomes and guaranteed work prescriptions for people working in sectors in need of reconversion or special support: organic farming, tourism, automotive, arms, and so on. No one said it would be easy, but the most interesting path lies unequivocally here.

Another major debate took place on the issue of profit. Containing profit within sustainability parameters, defended by D'Alessandro, seems to be the best option available. Not trying to eradicate it - advocated by Parrique - because that is such a maximalist objective that it will be tough to achieve, except in a time that we do not have. Moreover, it is not the main problem. Let's think: if we end profit but continue to aim for 3% annual growth, the problem of inequality will disappear over time, but the problem of the clash with planetary boundaries, the most urgent one, will remain practically unchanged. By going the other way around, eliminating growth but keeping "controlled profit", inequality might take longer to be brought in line with social justice. Still, the most urgent problem would be tackled quickly. The main problem is growth. Although tackling both problems simultaneously would undoubtedly be desirable, changing the socio-economic model of capitalism for one that better plans what

to do with resources, prioritises well-being and satisfying needs, in short, the good living. Simplicity and sufficiency were two words that were also heard many times, especially from IPCC author Yamina Saheb. In the same vein, economist Dan O'Neill contributed the proposal for maximum wages. And, of course, there was a commitment to encourage cooperatives and the social economy as much as possible.

Decolonial struggles were also very present. Feminism and the care economy were also present. Vandana Shiva presented the fact that should make the "civilised" world most ashamed: 80% of the biodiversity that protects and saves us so much is in the hands of the few indigenous peoples that we have allowed to survive, those that we consider backward since our colonial techno-talaya. The North-South divide is more between pockets. There are pockets of North in the South and vice versa - but the big ones tend to be men in both cases.

Another truism emerges from this debate: degrowth is urgent only for rich countries because it will free up space for other nations to develop and grow and thus find themselves in a kind of steady-state or post-growth economy. This point is widely shared: Europe—along with its descendants, the United States and Australia—has historically benefited the most from colonisation. It should now be our turn to assume its fair counterpart.

But in the beast's heart, there is more darkness than light. What von der Leyen is really proposing - with competition with the US and the emerging countries as a pretext - is just the opposite: [to roll back "green" legislation that has so far been cowardly, insufficient and lukewarm](#). Everything must be sacrificed on the altar of our era's true dogma of faith: the impossible infinite growth on a finite planet. Always supported by the other dogma that the miracle technology XXX (put your favourite miracle here: green hydrogen, nuclear fusion, carbon capture and sequestration...) will lead us to net zero emissions and, of course, to 100% renewable energy - mind you, energy, not electricity, which is still less than 25% of the total.

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Benoît Lallemand made it crystal clear: We have never made an energy transition; we have only added more and more sources to the energy mix. And you can probably guess by now what the main obstacle is to never having made the transition.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that one of the most crucial materials for the energy transition, copper, [is already showing clear signs of crashing against the limits of its production](#), proving that many techno-dreams, once a few numbers are crunched, are more like nightmares. Sandrine Dixon-Declève, co-chair of the Club of Rome, said one of those phrases destined to be remembered: "The only technology that can save us is a time machine that takes us back 50 years".

Concerning GDP, there were debates - which are already 70 years old - when Kuznets, the inventor of the GDP meter himself, said that making bicycles and tanks add up to the same thing, well, it doesn't. That making bicycles and tanks adds up to the same thing is not true. That polluting a river adds up to GDP because a company will go and clean it up is also not the case. That this meter is a scam that we should have abandoned decades ago. Parrique expressed the crucial debate in two sentences: "What we need to decouple are human needs from economic growth". When GDP goes up, nature and life-supporting ecosystems go down. The real question is: "Which of the two do we want to save?"

There were many mentions of the young and upcoming generations, and Tim Jackson's intervention in the final plenary was a highlight, which ended on a high note with two of those voices, Agata Meysner and Anuna de Wever, bringing the audience to its feet.

In a masterful intervention, Ann Pettifor advocated "blowing up the easy money pipeline" because it structurally favours the concentration of wealth. Some questions were also left unresolved or insufficiently dealt with, such as the need to find alliances with workers' struggles and trade unions or how to achieve all these changes, how to make them a reality, and the strategies of action, which were always insufficiently dealt with.

However, perhaps the most important bottleneck is the hyper-complex issue of debt, which directly links with monetary sovereignty. Perhaps a Beyond Debt, a specific event to try to find ways out that escape from easy slogans, such as cancelling it completely—since they do not take into account the global derivatives that something like this could provoke and do not distinguish between internal and external debt but assume that in reality a large part of it is unpayable—and odious—and that even the prompter knows it.

However, despite all the obstacles and blind spots, there is a clear path laid out by two of the best speeches of the event, in my opinion, namely, that of IPCC author Julia Steinberger and that of anthropologist Jason Hickel. In

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addition to many other fascinating questions, they chose to talk about democratisation, citizens' assemblies, and how the current political system is obsolete, corrupted by economic power and subject to electoral short-termism. Only through radical democratisation can we hope to manoeuvre

in time. This event has further highlighted the gap between science and politics, which can only be closed with more democracy or with its antagonist. With a formula that precisely unites the best available scientific knowledge with the best form of emergency policy-making we know, [assemblies are working](#), and as with this conference, the media are not telling the story. And these omissions, as Julia Steinberger herself denounced, have a clear reason.

Where these assemblies are held, more appropriate and radical measures are proposed than any political party will ever be able to implement. While some have these measures in their programmes, we need a political change that makes possible what, although indispensable, is impossible today. A non-reformist reform that, if well implemented, would be revolutionary. Thematic and regional assemblies that put politics back on the ground and prevent decisions from being taken in broad strokes, under the influence of lobbies and without considering the knowledge of experts and the territory itself. [For issues such as energy transition, they could not be more crucial.](#)

One of those most responsible for this event taking place and being so fertile was the chair of the event and co-chair of the European Greens, Phillippe Lamberts, who called for such events to take place in the parliaments of the different countries, and who could make a whole article on his contributions alone. But I will highlight one: [if we fail to reduce the metabolism of our economies, what will come will be more authoritarianism and dictatorships.](#)

We already see them growing like mushrooms all over Europe because of our failure to manage this contradiction. A contradiction that is even easier to understand in Spanish: either inescapable degrowth becomes a vox populi issue, that is, managed in a radically democratic manner, or it will end up being Vox, a secas.

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