

Case Study N°1: October 2022

Post-growth and the European Union

#De-growth, #A-growth, #Post-growth, #Steady-State Economy

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What is post-growth and why do we need it?

Post-growth is about going “beyond” the pro-growth orientation and reassessing the current “societal project” (CASSIERS & MARÉCHAL, 2018, p. 2). It is clear that economic growth has – for some time – had a stabilizing effect for capitalist societies (PETRIDIS et al., 2015). For many, it therefore remains “desirable, necessary, and capable of reconciliation with the environment” (BRAND & WISSEN, 2017, p. 2). However, the ongoing climate emergency and limited resources available on Earth are determinant factors that must be accounted for. For many it implies that **environmental margins and economic growth are no longer reconcilable** (see for instance GEORGESCU-ROEGEN, 1977).

The idea that an alternative paradigm to growth is required is expanding, and post-growth could be such alternative. Following post-growth, the societal blueprint is reconceptualized “beyond the pursuit of economic growth” (CASSIERS & MARÉCHAL, 2018, p. 2). In particular, “the flow of natural resources from the environment, through the economy, and back to the environment as waste” (DALY & FARLEY, 2011, p. 6) should be reduced. The different post-growth approaches (see Table 1) have one common denominator: the idea that the growth imperative of our current societal, economic, and cultural model is to be surmounted (SCHULZ et al., 2021) because it is incompatible with the physical limitations of planet Earth, making it unsustainable for the future (JACKSON, 2019). In practice, **the post-growth paradigm is composed of different approaches** (SCHMID, 2021), of which three stand out: **De-growth, Steady-State Economy (SSE) and A-growth.**

Table 1. Post-growth: three main approaches

	De-growth	Steady-State Economy	A-growth
Key author	André GÖRZ (<i>décroissance</i>)	Herman DALY inspired by John STUART MILL’s Stationary State	Jeroen C.J.M. VAN DEN BERGH
Definition	De-growth is considered as re-politicization of the public debate and a dismissal of the growth imperative (D’ALISA et al., 2014, p. 1).	In SSE, the economy basically “develops, but without increasing its material size” (THIRY, 2018, p. 86).	In a-growth economies, agnosticism towards growth is adopted: growth is “not an ultimate end, nor even a means to an end” (DREWS & VAN DEN BERGH, 2019, p. 54).

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Implications	<p>De-growth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is a “political project” to reorient the economic and political institutions while also changing the personal values and ambitions of individuals (KALLIS, 2011, p. 878) - implies the physical decrease of throughput (MARTÍNEZ-ALIER et al., 2010). 	<p>SSE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - corresponds to a stable Gross Domestic Product (GDP) all other things being equal (Czech, 2013). - proposes that once throughput exceeds earth’s capacity, “[p]hysical growth should cease, while qualitative improvement continues” (DALY, 1996, p. 13). 	<p>A-growth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - engages in “a rational approach to public decision making [by eliminating] the unnecessary constraint of unconditional GDP growth, hence avoiding growth-fetishism” (DREWS & VAN DEN BERGH, 2019, p. 58). - considers GDP growth as something that is not representative of progress or social welfare hence, disregarding and being disenchanted from it, is the answer following such perspective (VAN DEN BERGH, 2011).
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The positioning of the European Union with regards to post-growth

The European Union (EU) has the ability to expand its narratives and diffuse its ideologies (BOSWELL et al., 2011) and has the ability to infiltrate the economy, society, and its people’s way of living. **As of October 2022, the European economic strategy is to decouple economic growth from its dependence on material resources** (European Commission, 2019). Hence, growth, and not post-growth, remains the directive line and main objective of the Union, however the social and environmental contemporary European context, and its reliance on the resources of a finite planet, are recognized as mostly incompatible. **At the EU-level and in its policy context, the general tendency is to therefore embrace “sustainable growth”**, a way of “promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy” to ensure resource efficiency, competitiveness, and greener economy (European Commission, 2010, p.3).

As indicated by the director general of DG Research and Innovation, Jean-Eric PAQUET (2022), **“the case for a post-growth model [...] is won”**, however the only question that remains is how to apply it to the European economies. On that matter, **the COVID-19 pandemic – as a crisis – provided momentum for the post-growth approach to gain terrain** and challenge the dominant paradigm – growth – (PICOITO DO CARMO, 2022). Indeed, no matter the nature of a crisis (i.e., economic, social or health related), it can bring about the necessary opening to challenge the status quo (TONNE, 2021). The crisis must be acknowledged as “an opening for transformation” that result in changing norms and policy changes (*Ibid*, p.2). What is more, “[t]he global COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the crucial importance of human and ecological well-being, not only in and of itself, but also as a (pre)condition for any form of social and economic activity” (FIORAMONTI et al., 2022, p. 1). In fact, it revealed the intensified shortcomings of the European economic and social model, making it the possible ‘crisis’/‘anomaly’ necessary for a paradigm shift, that converts the existing awareness of growth limitation into a need for action following a post-growth orientation (PICOITO DO CARMO, 2022).

To date, no drastic shift is observable at the EU-level towards either de-growth, SSE, or a-growth. However, the European society and its political actors **are more likely to appeal to the a-growth stand** for its growth-agnosticism, especially as it might “depolarize the debate on growth-versus-environment” (DREWS & VAN DEN BERGH, 2019, p. 53). De-growth might be considered as too radical due to its “[...] rejection of the illusion of growth and a call to re[-]politicize the public debate colonized by the idiom of economism” (D’ALISA et al., 2014, p. 1). SSE is too reliable “on the size and the wealth of” an economy, hence being unapplicable to the same extend to all nations (CZECH & DALY, 2004, p.604) making it less ideal on a global and European scale.

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