

## Geopolitics Beyond Growth

Article by Gaya Herrington, Richard Wouters

May 3, 2023

The degrowth movement is rapidly gaining popularity in Europe. It advocates renouncing economic growth. But without growth, can we still stand up for our values and interests on the world stage? Richard Wouters asked sustainability expert Gaya Herrington about the geopolitical implications of an economic model without growth.

**Richard Wouters: You made headlines with a study that confirmed the message of the Club of Rome from 1972: we are nearing the limits to growth. What did your research entail?**

**Gaya Herrington:** I checked the scenarios the authors of the report *The Limits to Growth* created at the time with their world model against recent data. That confirmed the 1972 scenarios. I have seen many models in my lifetime. I don't know of one that has proven so accurate decades later. The data are closest to the business-as-usual scenario, in which we continue to pursue economic growth as the ultimate goal. Pollution and greenhouse gas emissions will cause ecosystem collapse in about 20 years from now. In this scenario of continued climate change, the global welfare level falls sharply.

We are furthest away from the stabilised world scenario, in which humanity stops pursuing economic growth, reduces its material footprint, and commits to improving healthcare, education and other public services, as well as clean technology. In that scenario, ecological breakdown is staved off. Right now, we are not moving in that direction, but the distance between this scenario and the data from reality can still be bridged. We can still avert collapse but it will be a bumpy ride because we have lingered too long for a gradual transition. What we do in the next 10 to 20 years will determine our level of prosperity for the rest of the century.

**Our latest issue – Priced Out: The Cost of Living in a Disrupted World – is out now!**

Read it online in its entirety or get your copy delivered straight to your door.

[READ & ORDER](#)

**Proponents of green growth argue that technological innovations make it possible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution while growing gross domestic product.**

You don't see that at all in the empirical evidence. It's just wishful thinking. You hardly see relative decoupling, where our ecological footprint grows less quickly than GDP. And you certainly don't see absolute decoupling, where that footprint shrinks while GDP grows. It is true that some countries are succeeding – slowly – in reducing greenhouse gas emissions while GDP grows, but other forms of pollution continue to increase while biodiversity declines. This is all the worse because we have been exceeding the boundaries of our planet's carrying capacity since the 1970s.

**You do not believe in green growth, but at the same time you keep your distance from the degrowth movement. Why?**

I am much closer to the degrowth camp than to that of green growth. But I want to emphasise that green growth is definitely useful for poor countries. There, growth still contributes directly to people's wellbeing. In Europe, this has long ceased to be the case – in fact, the drive for growth makes us unhappier because it fuels pollution and inequality. The policy agenda of the degrowth movement is very suitable for Europe.

My objection mainly concerns the term “degrowth”. It reminds people of a recession, with unemployment and social unrest. We must take this fear seriously. I agree with degrowthers that deliberate shrinkage of the economy sets in motion a more positive dynamic than not growing in a growth-oriented economy. But I fear that the term scares people so much that they no longer listen to that explanation. Therefore, I would rather let go of growth than actively degrow. An economy that focuses on human wellbeing and the protection of nature simply creates a more beautiful world. The best term for this is wellbeing economy. It provides an enticing perspective.

*What we do in the next 10 to 20 years will determine  
our level of prosperity for the rest of the century.*

**The countries of the EU bear the greatest historical responsibility for the climate crisis and the depletion of natural resources. They are also among the most affluent parts of the world. Is it likely that the EU will be the first to let go of economic growth?**

I think so. European politicians could very well be the first to realise that this is better for their citizens, that it prepares them for a new future. My research suggests that at some point in the next 20 years, growth will stop anyway. So we have a choice between consciously renouncing growth now or leaving it to a collision with our planetary boundaries. I hope politicians understand that the second scenario causes much more instability.

I would like to draw politicians' attention to the phenomenon of downshifting. That's a term from neurology. It indicates that when people are under stress from issues such as imminent violence and resource scarcity, instincts take over. The systems thinking needed to implement deep reforms in the EU still has a chance now; it's less likely we'll be cool-headed enough for it a decade from now.

I live in the United States, and here it seems more difficult to make the transition to a wellbeing economy, because politics is much more polarised. There is a strong movement for more gender inclusion, but in some states abortion and LGBTIQ+ rights are being scrapped and sustainability standards for companies are being vigorously opposed.

**Gender inclusion is the first step towards a wellbeing economy?**

Yes. This has to do with the difference between two models of society: the domination society and the partnership society. The first model maintains order through strict hierarchies: male over female, straight over gay, human over nature. That order must be maintained by coercion and violence. Such a society is characterised by great inequalities and by a constant drive for economic and territorial expansion. The second model of society, that of partnership, is egalitarian and democratic. Such a society pays more attention to the wellbeing of the community, caring for one another, and the conservation of nature. Throughout history you see that partnership societies cause less pollution, do not deplete their resources. They don't need economic growth or conquests to sustain themselves. Equality and gender inclusion are core elements of a sustainable well-being economy.

## **Can a society based on partnership defend itself against a society that strives for domination?**

In its pure form, such a partnership society cannot do that. It is not inclined to invest in defence. One of the most famous Dutch lines of poetry, by Lucebert, applies here: "All things of value are defenceless." In the real world, countries with a partnership model will have to move a little towards the domination model. That is a shame, because investments in the armed forces are at the expense of natural resources, but unfortunately it is necessary. Still, it is important not to lose yourself in a warrior mentality. You must have a strong army, not to dominate, but to engage.

*Equality and gender inclusion are core elements of a sustainable well-being economy.*

## **Domination versus partnership, which countries should we think of?**

Domination and partnership are the two ends of a sliding scale. No country has only one or the other model. Russia is an example of a country closer to the domination model. In Bhutan, with its gross national happiness policy, in Costa Rica, an eco-economy without an army, and in New Zealand, which assigns rights to nature, you clearly recognise the partnership model. The same applies to the EU, although it varies per country.

**Like degrowthers, you advocate high-quality public services as part of a wellbeing economy. These include social security, education and health care. In the EU, should we add defence and diplomacy to this list, now that the Russian attack on Ukraine has ended a long period of peace on our continent?**

Yes, I think so. You and I will not live to see the day when military power is no longer necessary, I'm afraid. We should also put diplomacy on the list of essential public services, although it is of course more credible if a government carries a big stick. It's important to know when to fight and when not to. That is how I see the role of the EU: it should be a proud frontrunner of sustainability, always with the intention of working together, but able and willing to defend itself if necessary.

**In a society without economic growth that has to maintain a strong armed force, there is even less room for private consumption.**

Indeed. In addition, we need a buffer in case our ecological footprint increases due to calamities such as a health crises or military conflict. That is why our economy should become completely climate neutral. Nature's capacity to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere then forms the buffer for emergencies.

**In geopolitics, GDP is an important indicator of power. Will an EU without economic growth lose power?**

That might have been the case in the past. But now we have to face the fact that growth will come to an end anyway, as said within 20 years. If the EU has transformed itself into a wellbeing economy by then, it will be stronger in the world. Countries that continue to chase growth while the ecosystem breaks down are heading for disruption.

**Can declining economic power be compensated by other forms of power?**

Social capital is a huge source of power. We see that today in Ukraine. The wartime resilience of

Ukrainians has amazed everyone. Russian men often have to be forced coerced into fighting because there is no big story they believe in. Ukrainians are in solidarity with each other, connected by a strong narrative about what they stand for and what they are fighting for. Many are willing to sacrifice their lives for it. A strong social fabric makes all the difference in times of crisis. And I think that a well-being economy that meets everyone's basic needs, a society where people feel that there is fair sharing and equal treatment, will reap social cohesion.

In contrast, societies in which coercion and violence predominate are often weaker than they appear. I sometimes compare the domination model with toxic masculinity: it looks very strong but it is as fragile as anything. The urge to expand causes shocks, of an ecological or other nature, and the resilience to absorb these shocks is lacking. A society based on domination will eventually.

*Countries that continue to chase growth while the ecosystem breaks down are heading for disruption.*

**In EU and the Global South relations, the domination model can still be recognised. We source much of our energy and raw materials from poor countries, often at the expense of the people who live there. Can a wellbeing economy without growth put an end to this neo-colonial extractivism?**

A Europe that focuses on wellbeing rather than growth can more easily reduce its dependence on imported energy and raw materials. The transition to solar and wind power can be accelerated if you need less energy. Circular solutions can meet the demand for materials faster if that demand stops growing. In this respect, abandoning economic growth has clear geopolitical advantages.

**A post-growth EU will see its share of global GDP decline even faster than it already is. Does such an EU need more allies in geopolitics?**

An EU beyond growth can become more selective in its choice of allies. You don't want to be condemned to friendship with autocracies like Russia and Saudi Arabia because you depend on them for raw materials or energy. Good allies do make it easier to focus on wellbeing. One of the reasons why Costa Rica can develop into an eco-economy is the protection it enjoys from the US.

**The EU also depends on the US, the strongest partner in NATO, for its security. We shelter under the American nuclear umbrella. Do you, as a resident of the US, think we can continue to count on this ally?**

That is difficult to predict, because American politics is highly polarised nowadays. I am cautiously optimistic. Surveys show that the younger generation is losing faith in the current form of capitalism. They attach much more importance to fair sharing. If the US goes in that direction, it could be a relatively good ally for a post-growth Europe.

*This interview is part of the Green European Foundation's transnational project [Geopolitics of a post-growth Europe](#).*

---



Gaya Herrington is a Dutch econometrician, sustainability researcher and women's rights activist. In 2021, her study *Update to Limits to Growth* made worldwide waves. In 2022, she published *Five Insights for Avoiding Global Collapse*.



Richard Wouters is a member of staff at Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks (the think tank of the Dutch GreenLeft party).

Published May 3, 2023

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/geopolitics-beyond-growth/>

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.*

*Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*