

## Article

# The EU's Green Deal: A Third Alternative to Green Growth and Degrowth?

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**Abstract:** In December 2019, the European Union introduced its Green Deal in which the ecological crisis is prioritized. In doing so, the EU seems to be breaking with its traditional green growth discourse. Does it? In this article, we seek to find out whether and to what extent the EC indeed has such a revolutionary cultural, economic and political agenda in mind with its Green Deal. While the green growth discourse presumes a growth-based economy that must become greener, the degrowth discourse questions the growth model and perceives it as ecologically irresponsible. If the European Green Deal represents a third alternative, then it will somehow succeed in prioritizing ecology without welfare loss. To ascertain to what extent the European Green Deal is that third alternative, three preliminary steps need to be undertaken. The first step consists in a brief exposition of the key features of the traditional green growth discourse, as propounded by the EC and its various allies. Thereafter, the overlaps between the green growth discourse and the European Green Deal are noted. In the third section, the latter's divergences from that previous model are highlighted. In the final section, the main question of the article is answered. It is also suggested that specific interpretations and implementations of the European Green Deal could possibly turn the original communication into an alternative to both green growth and degrowth.

**Keywords:** degrowth; European Union; Green Deal; green growth; green technologies; power structures

## 1. Introduction

In December 2019, the European Union (EU) introduced its Green Deal, arguing that “tackling climate and environmental-related challenges ( . . . ) is this generation’s defining task” [1]. The Green Deal appears to owe its name to Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, which consisted in the US federal government funding comprehensive social and cultural programmes to overcome the Great Depression of the 1930s and to foster national solidarity [2–4]. In a similar way, the European Commission (EC) presents the EU’s Green Deal as a “new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society” [1]. The novelty of the EU’s Green Deal is that it arises in a context of ecological crisis, which it explicitly wishes to address. Its programmes aim at realizing the twofold goal of prosperity for all and of overcoming the anthropogenic condition marked, amongst other things, by floods, droughts, desertification, heat waves, sickening environments, mass extinction, uninhabitable habitats, and the breakdown of food supply systems. Till now the EU had prioritized beating the economic crisis while reckoning with the climate issue. Hence, in its longstanding green growth discourse, the EU has emphasized green stimulus, environmental policy, and green innovations that reduce greenhouse gas emissions without hampering GDP growth. By now giving priority to

tackling the ecological crisis, the EU would seem to be breaking with its traditional green growth discourse. Indeed, the ecological crisis calls for transformative measures that aim at re-configuring the European economy, including its political-administrative and corporate power structure. In other words, by prioritizing the ecological issue, the EU would appear to be adopting a “revolutionary” pathway to a new European world that is in harmony with the biosphere and hence possibly marked by some form of degrowth [5]. The EU’s traditional green growth discourse, on the other hand, perpetuates the prioritization of economic growth.

Does the EC indeed have such a revolutionary cultural, economic, and political agenda in mind with its Green Deal? Or is the latter the continuation of a longstanding green growth discourse? Or does the Green Deal instead represent something in-between and thus offer potential new horizons for thinking about a synthesis between green growth and degrowth? These questions are addressed in the present article. Its twofold aim is to evaluate the novelty of the EU’s Green Deal that is, to analyze whether it breaks with its traditional green growth discourse or not and to discover potential, unarticulated new avenues for degrowth alternatives in that very same Green Deal. While the green growth discourse presumes a growth-based economy that must become greener, the degrowth discourse questions the growth model and perceives it as ecologically irresponsible. Green growth is the alternative to brown growth and aims at greening capitalism. It thereby relies on technological innovations, green investments, and green consumerism. Degrowth is the negation of both brown and green capitalism, and of the corresponding established capitalist power structures. Proponents of degrowth fight for new worlds beyond green capitalism, characterized by ecologically responsible economies, protection and restoration of ecological commons, and anti-consumerist lifestyles [6,7]. Green growth is conventional and “economic” in its orientation. Material standards of living are its primary concern, as opposed to, for instance, civic fellowship, justice, or a harmonious embeddedness in the natural environment. Green growth is an establishment discourse that leaves established oligarchical power structures intact [8,9]. Degrowth, by contrast, is post-conventional and ecological in its focus. Ultimately, degrowth is about cultural transformation; it is the negation of ecologically irresponsible middle-class lifestyles and corresponding mythologies (like the myth of progress), for the sake of cultivating eco-friendly lifestyles beyond middle-classness [10,11].

If the European Green Deal represents a third alternative, then it will somehow succeed in prioritizing ecology without welfare loss. That said, the ecology versus economy language is not very appropriate since acting now out of concern for the environment is also acting for the sake of future generations, yet to be born, and hence for the sake of future economic welfare. In other words, even from a purely economic perspective, a third alternative will give as much importance to present generations as to future generations; and will thus not saddle the latter with debts, wastes, and an unlivable planet [12]. The evaluative question that is to be posed while studying the Green Deal is whether the EC is critical enough of its own green growth discourse without getting into the degrowth paradigm. Does the EC envisage a world in which the old established power structures of green capitalism give way to new democratic, local, and community-based power structures? In other words, does it call on the same European values that once inspired the foundation of the original European union? To ascertain to what extent the European Green Deal is that third alternative, three preliminary steps need to be undertaken. The first step consists in a brief exposition of the key features of the traditional green growth discourse, as propounded by the EC and its various allies. Thereafter, the many overlaps between the green growth discourse and the European Green Deal are noted. In the third section, the latter’s divergences from that previous model are highlighted. In the final section, the main question of the article is answered. It is also suggested that specific interpretations and implementations of the European Green Deal could possibly turn the original communication into a viable European alternative to both green growth (traditionally conceived) and degrowth.

## 2. The EU's Green Growth Discourse

The EU's green growth discourse manifested itself most clearly in the context of the global financial crisis (2007–2009) and European debt crisis (2009–2014), in response to the alleged failures of the Lisbon Treaty (2000) and its sustainable development agenda [13]. In its Europe 2020 strategy (2010), Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (2011), and Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe (2011), the EC presented its green growth strategy as a pathway for overcoming the financial crisis through green stimulus, environmental policy, and green innovations. Underlying this strategy is the idea or belief that ecology and economy do not necessarily contradict each other, once “brown growth” which goes hand in hand with carbon-emissions, waste production, and extractivism is transcended. The green growth discourse presumes that economy and ecology can be reconciled in a symbiotic relationship, supplanting the parasitism of an ecology-degrading industrial economy. Accordingly, from a green growth perspective, environmental protection is an investment opportunity with high returns, rather than a costly restraint [14–18]. Green growth strategies consist in reconciling economic (productive and consumptive) activities and ecological challenges [19,20]. New types of jobs, new commodities, new technologies, and higher production and consumption may result from these measures. What economists refer to as “externalities” such as pollution and the loss of biodiversity become reasons for new investments and products (like wind or solar energy, eco-tourism, etc.). The symbiosis between economy and ecology thus consists in the economization of environmental protection, which results in new investments, subsidies, jobs creation, and green innovations. Environmental protection defined this way contributes to GDP growth, and therefore does not inspire the fear of “regression” and massive loss of jobs and decreased standards of living that degrowth discourses tend to arouse.

In Europe 2020, the EC explicitly recognized the compatibility between environmental protection and GDP growth. The greening of the European economy was conceived as being conducive to growth [13]. In this document, the EC thus identified the financial crisis as “a moment of transformation” towards a European economy that is more resource efficient, sustainable, competitive, and innovative in the development of green technologies. It set a target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20%, compared to 1990 levels. It communicated its commitment to rethink its longstanding brown-growth (environmentally harmful) subsidies; emphasized its commitment to emissions trading; expressed its will to revise its energy taxation system; and promised to encourage wider use of green public procurement (“green” consumption by public authorities) [13]. In its Biodiversity Strategy to 2020, the EC, alarmed by the loss of biodiversity largely caused by brown growth (including over-exploitation of “natural resources” and pollution), emphasized that the ecological crisis (which it acknowledges) represents economic losses. Ecology, the EC argued in this document, must be enhanced or rebuilt as “natural capital”, defined as natural assets that make life possible (such as ecological commons (soil, air, water, plant materials, etc.) and biodiversity) [21].

The green growth discourse was initiated by international organizations, mainly by the United Nations, OECD, and World Bank, before it was endorsed by the EU. The concept of green growth was coined during the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development (MCED) held in March 2005 in Seoul, when fifty-two governments from Asia and the Pacific agreed to pursue a path of “green growth” [22]. Since then green growth has been the most widely accepted solution to stop the degradation of the natural environment [11,15]. During that conference, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific articulated its commitment to environment-friendly GDP growth, making green growth the solution to the ecological crisis and the model of sustainable development. In 2008, the UN Environment-led Green Economy Initiative was launched, through which the UN offers a platform for its members for moving towards a green economy. At the OECD Ministerial Council Meeting in 2009, most of its member-states approved a declaration acknowledging that ecology and economy can (should) be reconciled; and asked the OECD to develop a framework for implementing the green growth strategy. That framework has been published in its *Towards Green Growth* (2011). Since then, the OECD has been a protagonist of green growth, which it justifies by

pointing out that development is undermined by a growth that continues to deplete “natural capital”. It is for the sake of “progress” that we must find “new ways of producing and consuming things, and even redefine what we mean by progress and how we measure it” [23]. It is significant that it also adds that “progress” might have to be redefined and measured differently. The World Bank, similarly, pointed to the “given natural resource constraints” that make greener poverty reduction inevitable [24]. The stability and prosperity of an economy, it noted, depends on the preservation of the natural environment. Given brown growth-based industry, the preservation of the natural environment cannot be taken for granted but requires active conservation. The latter refers to the management of “natural capital”, which is a green economic sector (the economizing of ecology), involving economic activities of accounting, investment, green jobs creation, etc. [17,25].

The belief that green growth is the solution to the ecological crisis is one that finds many supporters, especially among powerful public and private actors. As noted earlier, it is a discourse that was born among the powerful and perpetuated by them. The advantage of such an approach is that it does not threaten present power structures and the ideology that they undergird, namely, the Western enlightenment ideology of “progress”. Hence, the green growth approach ignores the fact that these very power structures have played an important role in generating the ecological crisis in the first place, and that the climatic aspect of the crisis is closely related to socioeconomic aspects of the crisis. The green growth discourse veils the fact that the ecological crisis is primarily a political problem that can only be tackled through new political arrangements and hence new power structures. In a robust sense, it could be argued that those powerful public and private actors see the ecological crisis as a new opportunity for growth. The EU’s green growth discourse is constructed and reproduced by the EC and its own associated networks, including the World Economic Forum and the Brussels Economic Forum [9]. These diverse stakeholders constitute a bloc or collation that is hegemonic enough to win consent. Conversely, it is powerful enough to delegitimize counter-discourses (such as the degrowth discourse). The mythological or narrative character of the EU’s green growth discourse plays an important role in suggesting a reality that is altogether different from brown growth realities. A critical examination of green growth policies and proposals reveals their traditional character. That is to say, the proponents of the green growth discourse represent a capitalist political-economic establishment that consists of the traditional oligarchical forces behind brown growth. Correspondingly, environmental protection becomes part of the new agenda of, for instance, multinational oil barons and giant energy corporations like Royal Dutch Shell that are presented as the leaders of the green transitions while they continue ruling the fossil fuel industry. The myth of green growth tries to veil the fact that the reactionary forces of brown growth actors which amongst other things, finance the climate denial machine [26], are those in charge of making a “green” future. In other words, the myth of green growth enables the ruling political-administrative and corporate powers to pursue dirty business as usual, legitimized through the green growth discourse [27–29].

The green growth discourse relies on the belief that economic growth can be “decoupled” from environmental violence. It is claimed that growth is possible without excessive exploitation of “natural resources” [8,11,15]. Such decoupling is allegedly made possible by green technologies. It is thus believed that green technologies are the solutions for overcoming the ecological crisis. New technologies purportedly improve the resource efficiency of production (for instance, by reducing the use of energy or natural materials), without altering the consumption patterns and middle-class standards of living and lifestyles of the current economy. The myth of green growth is hence marked by “technological solutionism” [30]. Green technological solutionism requires particular knowledge and skills and epistemic communities for developing green industries. This has implications for state subsidies for certain branches of higher education and training and of research and development. Research and knowledge that are conducive to green growth are thus prioritized. Similarly, as noted above, the development of green technologies, including sustainable energy systems, typically need state subsidies to be deployed.

Such investment is a political choice, which often means disinvestment in other sectors. The very composition of an economy and of society thus changes, leading to a different balance of powers (some sectors become more powerful than others). This interplay of economic, political, and technological forces is also involved in dematerialization and emissions reductions. Traditional brown production and consumption are taxed more heavily than (allegedly) green production and consumption, while green investments are encouraged by favorable tax arrangements. The green growth pathway thus entails formal institutional change, including new legislations and agencies that are invested with political-administrative power to pro-actively lead the structural transformation from brown to green growth. In sum, the implementation of green growth involves a wide variety of policy instruments (including R&D support, preferential tax treatment for green technologies investment, public procurement policies, setting emission standards, etc.) in several domains (health, education, transport, energy, etc.) [14,17,25]. Green growth requires robust industrial policies, which are particularly needed to increase green technology investments and adaptations [31].

### 3. The EU's Green Deal: A Continuation of the Green Growth Discourse?

Various scholars have concluded that the green growth pathway is not essentially different from the brown growth pathway. Despite emission reduction standards and the greening of technologies (and hence of production and consumption), the old power structures remain more or less unchanged, legitimized by the green growth discourse. The greening of capitalism does not destroy the old capitalism, whose main characteristic is its exploitative nature. This is why several observers have pointed out that absolute decoupling is unlikely to happen in the near future and that relative decoupling will not be sufficient to reverse the damage done [22]. The belief that growth is possible without environmental burden, and even more so, with reduced environmental burden rests on the yet unproven premise that technology can undo the harm done without causing further harm, either in the farther future or in the form of externalities (for instance, pollution in the regions where raw materials are extracted, disruption of local communities, the creation of more social inequalities, the making of surveillance societies [32]). Indeed, both the production and disposal of new green technologies involve processes that are often hidden from public scrutiny or simply not disclosed to the end users of these technologies. In other words, green growth is not quite as revolutionary as it is made to appear by its promoters.

The question thus arises whether and to what extent the EU's Green Deal, which is presented as the new way to shaping a sustainable Europe, diverges from previous green growth discourses and is indeed revolutionary. According to some scholars, any Green New Deal necessarily constructs and reproduces the green growth discourse to a greater or lesser extent. This, because it does not try to transcend the capitalistic premises of green growth, but instead, similarly to Roosevelt's New Deal, mollifies or tames the prevailing form of capitalism. In the case of Green New Deals, capitalism and ecology are reconciled into a "green" capitalism. Since the greening of capitalism is the core of green growth, the EU's Green Deal must accordingly be understood as a continuation of the green growth discourse, leaving oligarchical power structures (which are largely those of brown growth practices) intact. Thus understood, Green New Deals, including the EU's Green Deal, are about the making of green capitalism, typically and primarily to be realized via a sustainable energy transformation. Pollin articulates this perspective as follows: "here is the core premise of the Green New Deal: a worldwide program whose central aim is to invest 1.5–2 percent of global GDP per year in raising energy-efficiency standards and expanding clean renewable energy supply could realistically bring global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions down by 40 percent relative to today within 20 years, while also supporting rising living standards and expanding job opportunities" [31]. Such is the core premise that can be found in the EU's Europe 2020 strategy. In this document, the EC aims to reduce gas emissions by at least twenty percent compared to 1990 levels, increase the share of renewable energy sources in energy consumption to twenty percent; and increase energy efficiency by twenty percent [33]. The EU's Green Deal conceived this way involves, above all things, strict calculation, and percentages, and not so much



a new social pact, for instance, or revolutionary ways of thinking and living. It puts trust in green technologies, which are mainly defined as technologies that increase energy efficiency, increase the share of renewable energy sources in the so-called energy mix (that continues to include brown energy), and come with lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

At the heart of Green Deals lie the commitment to growth and the determination to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions—for instance, to reduce them to keep the average global temperature increase below two degrees Celsius, in accordance with the Paris Agreement (2015). This double commitment is certainly discernible in the EU's Green Deal, whose ambition is to make Europe greenhouse gas emissions neutral by 2050, without giving up on prosperity. The EC presents its Green Deal as a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use [1].

In the EU's Green Deal, it is emphasized that the challenges that come with the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene epoch (which it acknowledges) are to be addressed via a growth-oriented and a competitive greened economy, including a circular economy. The ecological crisis is to be addressed via more eco-friendly patterns of production and consumption, and the implementation of green technologies. In September 2020, the President of the EC, Ursula von der Leyen, stresses that, to realize the goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Europe must be reduced by at least fifty-five percent by 2030 (as contrasted with the forty percent reduction that had been the previous aspiration articulated in the green growth discourse) an aspiration to be enacted in a “climate law”. Following the green growth logic of the European Green Deal, this requires for the coming decade a 350 billion euro investment in greening technologies (like sustainable energy technologies, electrification of cars, etc.), which is even higher than in the previous decade of green growth (2011–2020) [34]. In other words, the green growth discourse is thereby being reiterated. The EU's Green Deal reasserts the belief that the ecological crisis can be negated and transcended through green technologies without any de-growth, that is, without compromising prosperity and established (middle class) standards of living. The green technologization of Europe, including further digital transformation, is facilitated by the EC's Sustainable Europe Investment Plan, established to channel investment into ecological protection, away from the fossil fuels industry, and hence to prioritize renewable energy sources [35]. The EU's Green Deal perpetuates the green growth discourse by endorsing and reinforcing the traditional vision of the industrial society, including its large-scale technologization, mechanization and automatization. The EC thus notes that “Europe has always been the home of industry” [36]. From this perspective, the greening of the economy entails new investment opportunities and hence new growth. As the EC puts it, the European Green Deal sets the objective of creating new markets for climate neutral and circular products, such as steel, cement, and basic chemicals [36]. To lead this change, Europe needs novel industrial processes and more clean technologies to reduce costs and improve market readiness.

This focus on European industry and hence on technology to solve the ecological crisis is not only characteristic of the green growth discourse which the EU's Green Deal propounds but also of brown growth. The main difference between the latter and the former is the source of energy, which will allegedly become greener. The traditional conceptual framework underpinning brown growth and its associated oligarchical power structure is hence not transcended. That framework is largely constituted by the ideas or images of the mastery and exploitation of nature conceived as a resource, and of the survival of the fittest in a harsh natural and social environment that is ruled by the strongest (might makes right). The dream of decoupling growth from ecological harm does not change those beliefs and images. The question that arises is whether it is justifiable to present the Green Deal as a revolutionary solution to the ecological crisis while old basic premises have not been negated.

Given the unchanged ways of thinking, it is hardly surprising that the oligarchical power structures characteristic of a brown energy-based economy remain largely unchanged in a green energy-based economy. Significantly enough, Green Deals in general, and the EU's Green Deal in particular, are typically presented by political-administrative actors as “innovative”, “transformational”

and “revolutionary”. However, since such announced changes are initiated and led by already powerful (industrial) actors, power structures remain reactionary [9,37]. So-called transformational technologies are promoted and implemented by an establishment that resists change beyond growth. This green growth status quo contradicts the political-administrative promise of “designing a set of deeply transformative policies” and “rethinking policies for clean energy supply” to push for “transformational change” [1]. “Transformational change” is to be realized through investments in big firms, including giant tech firms that are to deliver “the necessary digital transformation” [1]. According to this narrative, digital transformation is “a key enabler for reaching the Green Deal objectives” [1]. This fundamental contradiction is reason enough for some scholars to conclude that a Green Deal is destined to fail to deliver [38].

The EU’s Green Deal appears to suffer from the same shortcomings as older green growth narratives in the West. These are the problems of oligarchical power structures inherent to green and brown capitalisms, whereby the further technologization of Europe is not at all conceived as an objectionable ideal or in contradiction with the basic European values (like freedom, democracy, justice). As Vazquez-Brust, Smith & Sarkis point out, the EU’s green growth discourse is colonized by particular ideological structures and longstanding political agendas (such as the continued liberalization of markets) that limit the transformative potential of green growth in its original sense. According to these authors, the western version of green growth suffers from the decontextualization of the Asian (or, more specifically, South Korean) version of green growth, which, according to Vazquez-Brust, Smith & Sarkis, presupposes the institutionalization of ecological values and deliberative democracy, state intervention, and structural transformation of capitalist society [18].

#### 4. The EU’s Green Deal: Departing from the Green Growth Discourse?

Green New Deals are not necessarily simply green growth discourses recast. They may instead entail transformational measures that aim at shaping a new human condition that is different from a greener capitalistic order. Green New Deals can also be understood as alternatives to the green growth discourse and hence to green capitalism. A Green New Deal conceived this way aspires to more than providing economic opportunities for reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This, because the latter are seen as part of a much bigger political and cultural crisis (like the crisis of democracy and the crisis of the European values), which cannot be solved solely by greening production and consumption. Bozuwa describes a more ambitious version of the Green New Deal as follows: “What is the Green New Deal? It is not, and cannot be, simply about reducing carbon emissions. It must be ambitious enough to construct entirely new national institutions, reorganize sectors of our society, transform extractive industry into real wealth creation for communities, and rigorously rewrite the rules of the game for business and the economy at large” [39].

A Green New Deal defined this way endeavors to transform the structures and institutions of societies, including prevailing structures of power and economic arrangements. Only such an all-encompassing approach can effectively address the ecological crisis at its root [11]. The more tepid and piecemeal approach of combatting the various symptoms of the ecological crisis (CO<sub>2</sub>, nitrogen, and so on) has spurred on the economy and has succeeded in winning the support of powerful brown growth actors. However, as even the EC admits, such green growth measures are not able to truly overcome the ecological crisis because they are expected to lead to around sixty percent emissions reduction by 2050, which is far too little and far too slow (late) to check global warming [1]. Besides, it is hard to make statistics take into account developing countries’ legitimate drive to “catch up” in terms of material progress, which will entail a much greater demand for energy and probably an exponential increase in emissions (since it is unlikely that richer countries will share their greener technologies for free). Green New Deals therefore necessarily demand some kind of degrowth in already developed nations. New institutions, norms, standards, meaning, and lifestyles are part of such Green New Deals. Only then does a Green New Deal become “a revolutionary concept” [5].

As noted above, the EU's Green Deal exhibits features that make it a continuation of the established green growth discourse, in which growth, competitiveness, and established middle class standards of living (of comfort and mobility) are the highest goods that have to be preserved while searching for solutions to the ecological crisis. However, certain fragments and remarks point to possible horizons beyond green capitalism, that is, beyond the ends-means logic (whereby nature is defined as a mere means to achieve the end of growth). Though the EC does not explicitly have recourse to the language of the ecological commons that are to be protected against private appropriation (for instance, in the form of industrialist extractivism and other forms of plundering, land grabbing, and breaking democratic resistance), it does recognize the existence and importance of ecosystems. It also sees the connection between a restored natural environment and human health [1]. The EC thus emphasizes that it is essential to increase the value given to protecting and restoring natural ecosystems, to the sustainable use of resources and to improving human health [1]. This is where transformational change is most needed. The transformational change that would be necessary involves the prohibition of the privatization of the commons such as land and water and hence new laws, institutions, measures, and sanctions to deal with powerful (oligarchical) private actors.

Though the EC does not explicitly condemn industrialist extractivism for being an important cause of the ecological crisis [3,40,41], it does point out the problem of traditional industry that still largely relies on the extraction of resources. The worldwide extraction of materials, the EC emphasizes, poses "a major global risk" [1]. As far as the EU's industry is concerned, not only does it remain the major user of extracted materials, but it is also an important producer of greenhouse gas emissions [1]. The EC does speak in terms of the transformation of the industrial sector, which is necessary for climate neutrality. However, it remains vague as to the content of that transformation. Does it only involve the means of production? Or should such transformation be more revolutionary? In the latter case, people might fear for their jobs. Anticipating this fear, the EC reassures its audience that such ecological transition will mean more jobs directly after mentioning the needed transformation of the industrial sector [1]. From time to time, the language used in the document is more explicit and categorical. This is the case when the EC says that it will "take a zero-tolerance approach to illegal, unregulated fishing" or that "the natural functions of ground and surface water must be restored" [1]. Given the EC's repeated emphasis on the "just and inclusive" nature of the transition [1], it can be surmised that policies will also have to reckon with those who have recourse to illegal fishing and deforestation because of poverty.

The EC's emphasis on an inclusive transition is significant and might be a sign of a pathway towards a genuine Green New Deal since that would suggest different power structures. The European Climate Pact evokes the idea of a new social pact that arises out of the shared concern for the ecology, for present and future generations of all living beings. The EC thus remarks that "the involvement and commitment of the public and of all stakeholders is crucial to the success of the European Green Deal. Recent political events show that game-changing policies only work if citizens are fully involved in designing them. People are concerned about jobs, heating their homes, and making ends meet, and EU institutions should engage with them if the Green Deal is to succeed and deliver lasting change. Citizens are and should remain a driving force of the transition" [1].

Assuming that the EC does not simply mean that it is strategically more effective to have people work with it than against it, this fragment can be interpreted as supportive of democratization, which would resist technocratic policy and decision making as well as the established oligarchic forces of brown and green growth. The EC's tactful allusion to the industrial and financial sectors reflects their established power. In the EC's Industrial Strategy, it is noted that "Europe's industry must play a leading role in the ecological transition" [36]. In particular, the Industrial Strategy reinforces the European Green Deal's call for a consumer policy that helps empowering consumers to make informed consumer choices for sustainable or eco-friendly products [1,36]. This means full disclosure about not-so-sustainable production processes, products themselves and their disposal. A similar disclosure is expected from companies and financial institutions that will be required to be transparent about



their “climate and environmental data so that investors are fully informed about the sustainability of their investments” [1]. This requirement of disclosure and transparency is an important step towards addressing the problem of the so-called externalities of both brown and green growth.

“Technological solutionism”, as noted above, is an important aspect and indication of both brown and green growth. In line with the green growth tradition, the EU subscribes to the belief that the further technologization of Europe is the pathway for overcoming the ecological crisis. This belief is expressed in several documents, including the European Green Deal. Any divergence from the green growth discourse regarding industrial and digital technologies is thus significant. On a first reading, a possible transcendence of green capitalism at the level of technology is not visible. According to the EC, “new technologies, sustainable solutions and disruptive innovation are critical to achieve the objectives of the European Green Deal” [1]. And these new technologies, it appears in the European Green Deal, are first of all digital or algorithmic technologies: “the Commission will support work to unlock the full benefits of the digital transformation to support the ecological transition” [1]. However, in the EC’s Digital Strategy Shaping Europe’s Digital Future it is also pointed out that “the ICT sector also needs to undergo its own green transformation” [42]. In the European Green Deal, the Commission remarks that Europe “needs a digital sector that puts sustainability at its heart”, just after noting that “digital technologies are a critical enabler for attaining the sustainability goals of the Green deal in many different sectors” [1].

Such footnotes might suggest that the EC recognizes the ecological harm that the Digital Revolution has inflicted on ecosystems, in terms of electricity use, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, electronic waste (dumped in the Global South), and use of extracted materials (like cobalt and the so-called “blood batteries”), and non-recyclable materials. But that may well be a premature conclusion. The tenacity of the green growth discourse manifests itself primarily in the uncritical attitude towards the ICT sector. Hence, while the EC stresses the need for more energy efficiency and recycling in the ICT sector, it seems more hesitant to set norms for the latter. The remark that “the Commission will assess the need for more transparency on the environmental impact of electronic communication services ( . . . )” does not really reflect a sense of urgency. The power of the high-tech industry, including its ideological orientation and hegemonic practices, is left intact [43]. Accordingly, free rein is given to some powerful oligarchical tech firms to determine the direction and content of the ecological transition.

## 5. The EU’s Green Deal: A Middle Way between Green Growth and Degrowth?

The question regarding the distribution of power that is, the distribution of influence to determine the ways to achieve a sustainable economy and lifestyle in general is an important criterion to evaluate the extent to which the European Green Deal diverges from the green growth discourse. Such sensitivity to power distribution is not very pronounced in the Green Deal. In fact, the European Green Deal stakeholders are predominantly brown growth and green growth stakeholders. The latter, including international organizations, are well-organized in economic forums and networks, constituting a bloc that reproduces and benefits from the green growth discourse [9]. The EC’s emphasis on energy efficiency in Europe 2020 (2010), Green Deal (2019), Industrial Strategy (2020) and Digital Strategy (2020) does not involve a change of power structures, that is, of the system that has led to the ecological crisis. Instead, brown growth stakeholders (like oil corporations) are expected to become leaders in the transition to greener energy and smarter use of energy. A democratic energy transition, in which European values like rule of law, justice, and equality of freedom are important aspirations and political promises, does not seem to be a primary concern in the European Green Deal. Yet, that concern is from time to time visible even if it is expressed in a technocratic and economic language, such as a competitive renewable energy market, which may be conceived as anti-monopoly (or anti-oligarchy) measure. However, this emphasis on competitiveness might also be the continuation of the brown and green capitalism that has led to the ecological crisis.

The EC’s focus on isolated elements of a bigger picture at the expense of that bigger picture is illustrated by the following statement on energy efficiency: “Energy efficiency must be prioritized.

A power sector must be developed that is based largely on renewable sources, complemented by the rapid phasing out of coal and decarbonizing gas. At the same time, the EU's energy supply needs to be secure and affordable for consumers and businesses. For this to happen, it is essential to ensure that the European energy market is fully integrated, interconnected, and digitalized, while respecting technological neutrality" [1]. The EC does not problematize the middle class, capitalist lifestyle that has led to increasing energy consumption, but instead assumes that this way of living can be maintained by new sources of energy. The absence of limits, which is characteristic of both brown and green growth discourses, is also present in the European Green Deal. The prevailing economic system and alliance between politics and economics are taken for granted and endorsed. The failure to transcend the frame of mind that corresponds to that system results in the neglect of community-based solutions, that is, of local democracies that determine the direction and content of their local economies, including the amount of energy used. Energy commons could have been mentioned and highlighted. From the standpoint of inclusion and justice, the inclusion of citizens in political decision-making regarding their earth system must arguably be more than getting them to cooperate with authorities, industry, and the EU's administrative bodies [1].

As noted earlier, the EC's reference to transparency or disclosure, inclusiveness, and justice are a few signs of the realization that prevailing power structures undergirding green growth need correction. While the EU's Green Deal does not formulate degrowth ambitions, the hoped-for "ecological transition" is from time to time commons-oriented (rather than industry-oriented); and calls for the restoration and protection of the commons (the EC primarily refers to local food, fresh water, clean air and shelter) from industrial exploitation. Admittedly, the EC does not explicitly use the language of the commons, just as it does not explicitly prioritize ecology above industry. The "green oath: 'do no harm'" principle is introduced to protect and restore the commons, based on the EC's recognition that industry has harmed (and continues to harm) the commons. The green oath could reflect or could be made to reflect a different ecological understanding of, and relationship to, nature, far beyond green growth's economic understanding of nature as "natural capital" [41]. As Vazquez-Brust, Smith and Sarkis put it, "rather than protecting nature by giving it a price, nature should be protected by reinforcing values of moral duty and affectedness reinforcing the uniqueness and intrinsic value of life supporting systems and the moral duty to live in harmony with nature" [18].

Could the EC's remark that "a new pact is needed to bring together citizens in all their diversity" [1] be interpreted as alluding to the necessity to include degrowth voices in the debate and decision-making? It is significant that the EC should point to the inadequacy of traditional approaches: "conventional approaches will not be sufficient. Emphasizing experimentation, and working across sectors and disciplines, the EU's research and innovation agenda will take the systemic approach needed to achieve the aims of the Green Deal. The Horizon Europe program will also involve local communities in working towards a more sustainable future, in initiatives that seek to combine societal pull and technology push" [1]. Such a statement evokes images of some form of "green republicanism" [40] or "ecological democracy" [44]. However, the transition to radical green democracies will not take place without strong resistance movements that can question and counter established traditions sustained by powerful oligarchs [10]. In Table 1, an overview is provided of the contrasts between green growth, degrowth and the EU's Green Deal.

**Table 1.** Overview of green growth, degrowth and the EU Green Deal.

	Green Growth	Degrowth	EU Green Deal
Ecology	- nature as a resource - nature as an investment opportunity	- nature as a biosphere - nature as ecological commons	- mainly nature as a resource - notion of an ecosystem - green oath
Economy	- green capitalism - firm-based	- economy embedded in ecology - community-based - commons-based	- green capitalism - acknowledges problematic nature of industry and extractivism
Power structures	- top down elite networks	-bottom up movements	- top down elite networks - inclusive transition - support for democratization
Technology	- technological solutionism - tech-firm-led digital transformation - green tech	- socially embedded tech - low tech	- technological solutionism - tech-firm-led digital transformation - green tech
Sustainability	- decarbonization	- structural transformation of capitalist society	- decarbonization - recognition that green growth will not be sufficient to realize zero emissions by 2050
Lifestyle	- consumerist	- anti-consumerist	- consumerist
Discourse-makers	- capitalist elite networks	- counter-movements	- capitalist elite networks

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have briefly reconstructed the main features of the traditional green growth discourse as propounded by the EU and other powerful governance actors. These are the beliefs that environmental protection and GDP growth are compatible, and that green technology will solve the ecological crisis. Existing power structures are thereby left more or less unchanged. We have then examined to what extent the EU's Green Deal perpetuates the traditional green growth discourse and to what extent it diverges from it, forming a possible third way between green growth and degrowth. The EU's Green Deal is yet another version of the green growth model through its endorsement and reinforcement of the middle-class lifestyle and of the traditional vision of industrial society, including its large-scale technologization, mechanization and automatization. We have identified four tendencies in the Green Deal that may make it become a third way, depending on its further interpretation and implementation. The first one concerns the idea of the ecological commons that must be protected against private appropriation. Though the EU does not have recourse to this terminology explicitly, it does acknowledge the importance of ecosystems. Secondly, it cautiously points to the problem of traditional industry that still largely relies on the extraction of resources. Thirdly, its emphasis on an inclusive transition evokes different power structures. And finally, certain fragments suggest support for more democratization and hence resistance to technocratic policy and decision making.

It would be far-fetched to suggest that the European Green Deal communicates an integral transition that involves a radical critique of an ecologically harmful culture and represents a resolution to go beyond green capitalism [2,3,5,28,40]. The European Green Deal is the product of compromises and reflects the diversity (and disagreements) among EU member states regarding the content of the ecological transition. Such diversity is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the differences in fossil fuel subsidies, including fiscal and other forms of indirect financial support, and in the paces at which fossil fuels are being phased out in various countries. The traditional green growth pathway is a most popular discourse because it does not evoke fearful images of loss and less. It is thus hardly surprising that the EU's Green Deal should be largely a continuation of its traditional green growth discourse. This may explain why the European Green Deal has been readily embraced by businesses. They mainly seem to do so on the premise that the European Green Deal is a continuation and further updating of the green growth discourse. They see opportunities that are mainly associated with the energy transition, electrification of cars, and state subsidies and investments in greening corporate capitalism [45].

At the same time, the EC acknowledges the fact that green growth measures will not reach the climate neutrality goal by 2050. Though prevailing power structures, including alliances between governments and industry (including fossil fuel and ICT industries), are not explicitly denounced, certain fragments signal post-conventional degrowth visions in which the ecological transition is not conceived as merely an economic opportunity. It could be argued that such a vision is not easily reconciled with corporate life. Yet, contrary to what one may expect, there are companies that endorse degrowth business models [46,47]. Such models may include fair trade, community currencies, barter markets, ethical banks, community land trusts, community ownership, local production and distribution, democratization of technology, limited use of resources and electricity, etc., based on the recognition that companies and markets and entire economies are first of all embedded within the biosphere.

Inclusiveness and justice, to which the EC subscribes, can only be reached when people worldwide are included in the ecological transition and when they are enabled to create their own alternative futures in harmony with the needs of the biosphere and local ecosystems. The “new pact” to which the EC refers might become a genuinely new pact if oligarchical power structures are resisted, and accordingly, if the ecological transition is not led by those who have been powerful actors in the disastrous brown growth world. The future new elite in the new sustainable Europe that is yet to come will have to be able to gain the trust of all and, of course, be trustworthy. The EC’s general reluctance to denounce old oligarchical power structures is one of the inner contradictions in the proposed European Green Deal. Perhaps it is hoped that they will disintegrate as new green sectors develop. That hope might be too optimistic given the fact that most freedoms and affirmation of European values have been acquired through resistance and much bloodshed. Economic and political power is something that oligarchic establishments rarely give up voluntarily.

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis is for many a possible turning point and, as with all crises, consists of destructions that may become the ruins from which new ecological creations may rise. This does not amount to saying that Covid-19 provides “new opportunities” since that would be a blatant disregard of the sufferings of so many, including underprivileged groups and individuals, and the social disruptions it has led to. Yet, the pandemic crisis has confirmed certain things about prevailing economies. One is the high price of mobility. Reduced economic activities and especially reduced air and road traffic during lockdowns went hand in hand with a reduction in emissions [4]. According to data released by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and European Space Agency, pollution dropped by thirty percent in some Covid-19 epicenters [48]. Such data confirm what was already known and remind us of the necessity to re-create local, national, and the global economies that are ecologically sustainable and perhaps also pandemic-resilient. Of course, there is also a chance that it will be business as usual after the pandemic crisis (if it ever ends). It is significant that an important EU spokesperson, Frans Timmermans (the EC’s executive vice-president for the European Green Deal) should see the pandemic crisis as an opportunity to break old habits that are ecologically unsustainable [49]. The European Green Deal, he notes, is not a “luxury” that Europeans cannot afford for two reasons. For one thing, the Green Deal does not mean economic regression; and for another thing, it is not as if we can afford to reject it since natural calamities and new viruses are likely to become part of the European future. Timmermans and Piccard thus point out that “instead of using the stimulus packages to support ‘business as usual’ locking in obsolete economic models, and investing in assets that will soon be stranded we should invest in the new economy to come out of the crisis in better shape than we went into it, fit for the future: sustainable, inclusive, competitive and prepared” [49]. This makes the European Green Deal into what could be called a “critical green growth” model [18]. In this sense, it is not simply the reiteration of the traditional green growth discourse and is certainly not a degrowth proposal for EU member states.

The Dutch government’s bailout package for the airline KLM (approved by the EC on 13 July 2020) seems to contradict the articulated aspiration to transcend the old framework. Yet, it is significant that the rescue package which has caused great commotion is a conditional aid. There are strings

attached to it: those earning more than three times the average salary are expected to give up twenty percent of their salary; no dividends are to be paid out to shareholders until the state loan has been repaid; a bonus stop; cost-saving organizational restructuring; a reduction in the number of night flights from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol; and KLM has allegedly expressed its commitment to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by fifty percent per passenger kilometer in 2030 (relative to 2005) [50]. It is noteworthy that Greenpeace Netherlands has expressed its intention to sue the Dutch government for this bailout if it does not demand a concrete climate action plan from KLM and if it does not impose a CO<sub>2</sub> emissions cap on KLM [51]. In the summons letter addressed to the Dutch Minister of Finance and Dutch Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management, Greenpeace Netherlands, through the mediation of its legal representative, points out that the focus on CO<sub>2</sub> fails to reckon with the so-called non-CO<sub>2</sub> climate impacts of aviation. It also notes that KLM's recourse to "compensation" regarding CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in fact entails no real reduction in emissions.

The clash between Greenpeace and the Dutch government-KLM alliance illustrates the difficult pathway towards a sustainable European future, not so much because ecology and economy clash, but rather because of the fear of radical change of established power structures. In many respects, the European Green Deal tries to counter this fear, but whether its realization goes beyond green capitalism will depend on the political will and associated power structures of both the EC and individual EU member states. That said, the inevitable evolution of climate change might compel rich EU countries to have recourse to degrowth strategies for the sake of global justice and peace, or simply because the rest of world is no longer willing to accept their wastes. The global majority may moreover no longer be willing to accept the fact that a rich minority has been, and is still, consuming most of the world's natural resources. Political instability and demands for justice are to be expected in the future, and such factors will have a huge impact on European strategies. The transition to the new world might be less rough if people in developed countries would already start to get used to the idea that less quantity might mean more quality and well-being.

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