Degrowth Mentalities, Degrowth Ontologies

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What does degrowth stand for?

- Minimal, non-homogenizing definition:

  - A heterogeneous spectrum of activist and scientific actors and approaches in Northern (mostly European) countries – loosely held together by a series of conferences and publications

  - Common denominator: Critique of „growth" as an expansionary logic, paradigm or imperative inherent to modern capitalist societies that yields destructive consequences for humans and non-human nature

  - Call for a far-reaching social-ecological transformation entailing radical changes to the modes of living prevalent in Northern/European societies, rejection of technological solutionism and ‚ecological modernization'

  - The transformation aspired to is also broadly envisioned as emancipatory – post-capitalist, de-colonial, feminist, peaceful, bottom-up

- Apart from this minimal consensus, degrowth is a field of differing mentalities and ontological contestation

What does degrowth stand for?

Traditions: Ecological Economics (Georgescu-Roegen), autonomy-oriented social critique (Gorz, Illich, Castoriadis), anti-utilitarian critique of economics (Latouche)

Core tenet: dismantle global socio-ecological injustices by democratically finding ways toward globally just and generalizable modes of living for the societies of the global North

Object of critique: Unsustainable, exploitative and and unjust social and socio-natural relations, global environmental injustices

Basic elements: Social, not technical solutions – end extractivism, regionalise and democratise economies, redistribute and reduce extent and importance of formal labour, politicise desires

Vision: Freeing the material, institutional and mental infrastructures of society from the growth imperative – global ecological justice and a good life for everybody worldwide

Idea of transformation: Contested – broad and plural debates around different strategic approaches, large divergences at first sight…

The Research: Mentalities and practices of the degrowth spectrum

The Research: Mentalities and practices of the degrowth spectrum

- Questionnaire survey at the Leipzig Degrowth conference in 2014, paper and on line, 814 out of ca. 3000 participants → ~27%

- Questions on:

    - **Social background** (age, nationality, education, socioeconomic status, family background etc.)

    - **Everyday practices**: Mobility, communication, networking, diet, living circumstances

    - **Activist practices:** Membership and activity in movements and organisations, forms of political action, use of technologies

    - **Views and attitudes** on much-discussed and controversial topics in the movement (29 statements, 5-point Likert scale)

Mentalities, Ontologies

- My research focuses on ‚socio-ecological mentalities':

  - Different, socially specific patterns of views, attitudes and feelings in relation to the social and socio-natural world

  - Shaped (rather than determined) by individual and collective experience in specific social positions – not mere ideas, but inscribed in the body

  - Form ‚syndromes' – typical *overall* patterns of dispositions or forms of *habitus* that are non-coincidentally distributed within society

  - Different social experiences bring about different ‚kinds of humans' that relate to each other and to nature in vastly different ways, making common understandings hard to reach

  - It's not about identifying clear-cut ‚groups' and categorizing people, but about identifying structuring oppositions, conflicts and lines of tension within a social field

- In our research on the Degrowth spectrum, we found five basic types of mentality – or currents of that spectrum

  - The differences, incommensurabilities and conflicts between these mentalities also stand for ontological differences: Each mentality tends to correspond to an ontological position

  - Ontological arguments are also arguments between different social groups defending their respective embodied experience – or attempts to define common ground by inventing new, commensurable ontologies

Degrowth and Flexible Capitalism: What is ‚growth' today?

- *Flexible Capitalism* as a mode of growth that has taken shape since around 1971, partly as a result of social movements' struggles against the standardizing, alienating growth model of post-war organized (or Fordist) capitalism

- General logic: Generating expansion of economic activity through ongoing restructuring of social and political relations in increasingly *short-term, piecemeal* and *noncommitted* ways

- Raising of **productivity** through

  - ‚just-in-time' processes,

  - piecemeal downscaling of units of account for all inputs to production (labour, resources&energy, capital),

  - low-commitment terms of interaction (competitive value, service and care chains)

- Raising of **consumptivity** through

  - Advanced technologies for the production of ever new momentary desires;

  - Financialization – democratized access to credit as a way to raise mass purchasing power at the expense of the future;

  - Shortened product cycles, planned obsolence, accelerated fashion trends, etc.

- Social effects:

  - Concentration of wealth (inequality) and economic power (monopoly corporations)

  - Broadened and deepened extractive and exploitative relations between capitalist ‚cores' and ‚peripheries'

  - Generalized indeterminacy, uncertainty and precarity

  - Subjective logic of ‚**dividualization**': fragmentation of subjectivity in terms of producer- (‚skill portfolios'), consumer- (fashioning of identities through consumptive acts) and citizen-subjects (Short-term, piecemeal and low-commitment forms of political participation)

The degrowth spectrum: Five currents/mentalities

Cluster 1: Sufficiency-oriented Critique of Civilization (22%)

Stark eco-radicalism; poignant critique of modern society, preferred strategy: build resilient communities – often among older movement veterans, ecovillagers etc.

Cluster 2: Immanent Reformism (19%)

Belief in technology and progress within existing institutions; opposed to both anti-modernist and revolutionary ideas; strategies between „green growth" and growth-transcendent reforms – often among men, low activism, little movement identification, frequent flying, intense technology use

Cluster 3: Voluntarist-pacifist Idealism (23%)

Aspiration to overcome the „religion" of growth; vision of a peaceful bottom-up transformation; strong focus on everyday practice as a starting point of far-reaching change – mostly among young women and students

Cluster 4: Modernist Rationalist Left (13%)

Classical leftist, (eco-)socialist position; structure-oriented anti-capitalism; belief in social progress; strategy: engage in theoretical analysis to prepare all-out revolution – often among men, highly educated & urban groups, Germans, activists in left-wing movements and trade unions

Cluster 5: Alternative Practical Left (22%)

Anarchist-inspired radical critique of capitalism and modernity with feminist and de-colonial elements; strategy: Revolution through practical self-transformation – relatively often among non-Germans and non-smartphone owners, typically coupled with intense ‚glocalist' activism in a broad diversity of movements

Eversberg, Dennis/Schmelzer, Matthias (2018): „The Degrowth Spectrum: Convergence and Divergence within a Diverse and Conflictual Alliance". *Environmental Values* 27, Nr. 3 (2018): 245–68.

Societal scale – Cognitive-analytical Politics

Radical Left Movements

Regular Meat

Unions

Frequent Flying

Science-Activism Networks

Highly Networked

Political Parties

Use of Technical Resources

Direct Action

Conferences/ Workshops

Organization/ Antagonism/ 'Struggle'

Networks/ Gradualism/ ‚Problem Solving'

No flights

Weakly Networked

Student Initiatives

Social/Environmental Movements

Veganism

Personal/local scale – Communitarian/Individualist Movement Activism

‚Society' (structural/systemic approaches)

‚Smashing Growth'

‚Taming Growth'

Antagonism – Radical change

Gradualism – Incremental change

‚Escaping/outliving Growth'

‚Undoing Growth'

‚Community' (localist/immediatist approaches)

The Ontology of Rupture (‚Smashing Growth')

Image of society: Centralized, all-encompassing power structure, sharp class division, permanent struggles

‚Growth' as ideological misrepresentation of the accumulatory imperative of capital – strictly separated from the idea of (social) *progress*, which is still aspired to

Societal nature relations: Human labour as constitutive of both ‚society' and ‚nature' – far-reaching capacity of humans to form and alter nature

Theoretical references: Classical Marxism, Critical Theory – determinist materialism

Image of Transformation: Revolution – freeing labour from the domination of capital

Subject(s) of Transformation: Working classes, Militant mass movements

Transformative Action: Radical mass street actions to challenge power; strikes; theoretical system critique

Historical prototype: Russian Revolution

Actors within DG Spectrum: Organized left-wing groups & academics – ‚Modernist Rationalist Left'

Critique: Economically reductionist; rooted in escalatory modernism; arrogant dismissive stance toward other ontologies; lack of ‚convincing' alternative; ineffectuality due to abstractness and historical failure
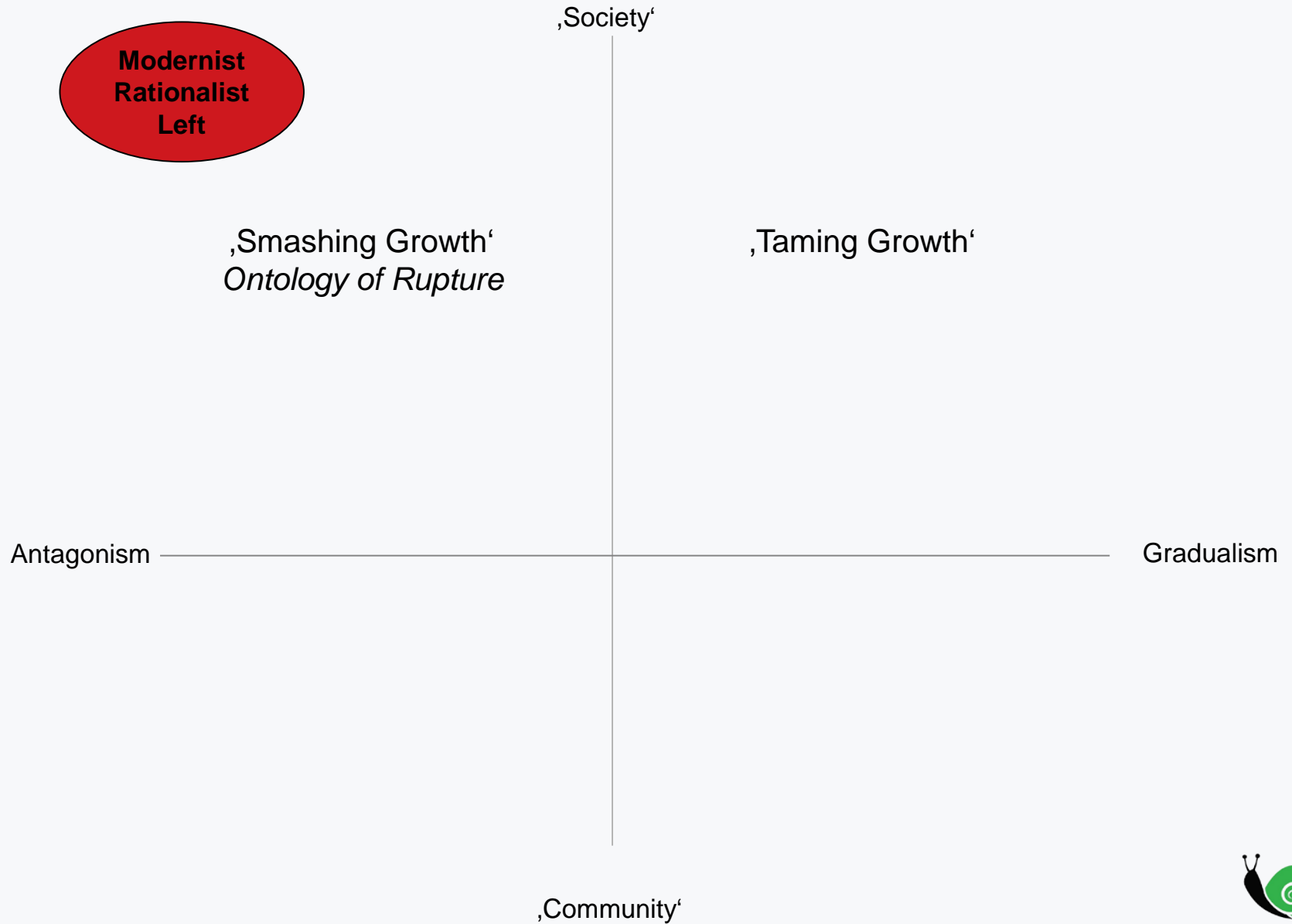
'Society'

Modernist Rationalist Left

'Smashing Growth'
Ontology of Rupture

'Taming Growth'

Antagonism ———————————————————————— Gradualism

'Community'

The Ontology of Transition ('Taming Growth')

Image of society: Market and democratic state as tried and tested, reliably functioning institutions for the self-government of a modern liberal society

'Growth' as an unwanted side-effect or aberration of the market economy which is to be curbed through wise regulation and well-designed incentives

Societal nature relations: Naturalist ontology – nature as object of human technological intervention, human responsibility to 'take care of it'

Theoretical references: Ecological modernization

Image of transformation: Growth-transcendent reforms

Subject(s): Progressive political actors, experts, 'civil society'

Transformative Action: Developing & proposing alternative policy measures, convincing political actors & majorities

Historical prototype: Creation of welfare states

Actors within DG Spectrum: Eco-reformers, NGOs – 'Immanent Reformism'

Critique: „New critical orthodoxy" as hindrance to radical change; 'dualist' ontology and adherence to modernist tenets; ineffectuality due to co-optation

,Society'

**Modernist
Rationalist
Left**

,Smashing Growth'
Ontology of Rupture

,Taming Growth'
Ontology of Transition

**Immanent
Reformism**

Antagonism ———————————————————————— Gradualism

,Undoing Growth'

,Community'
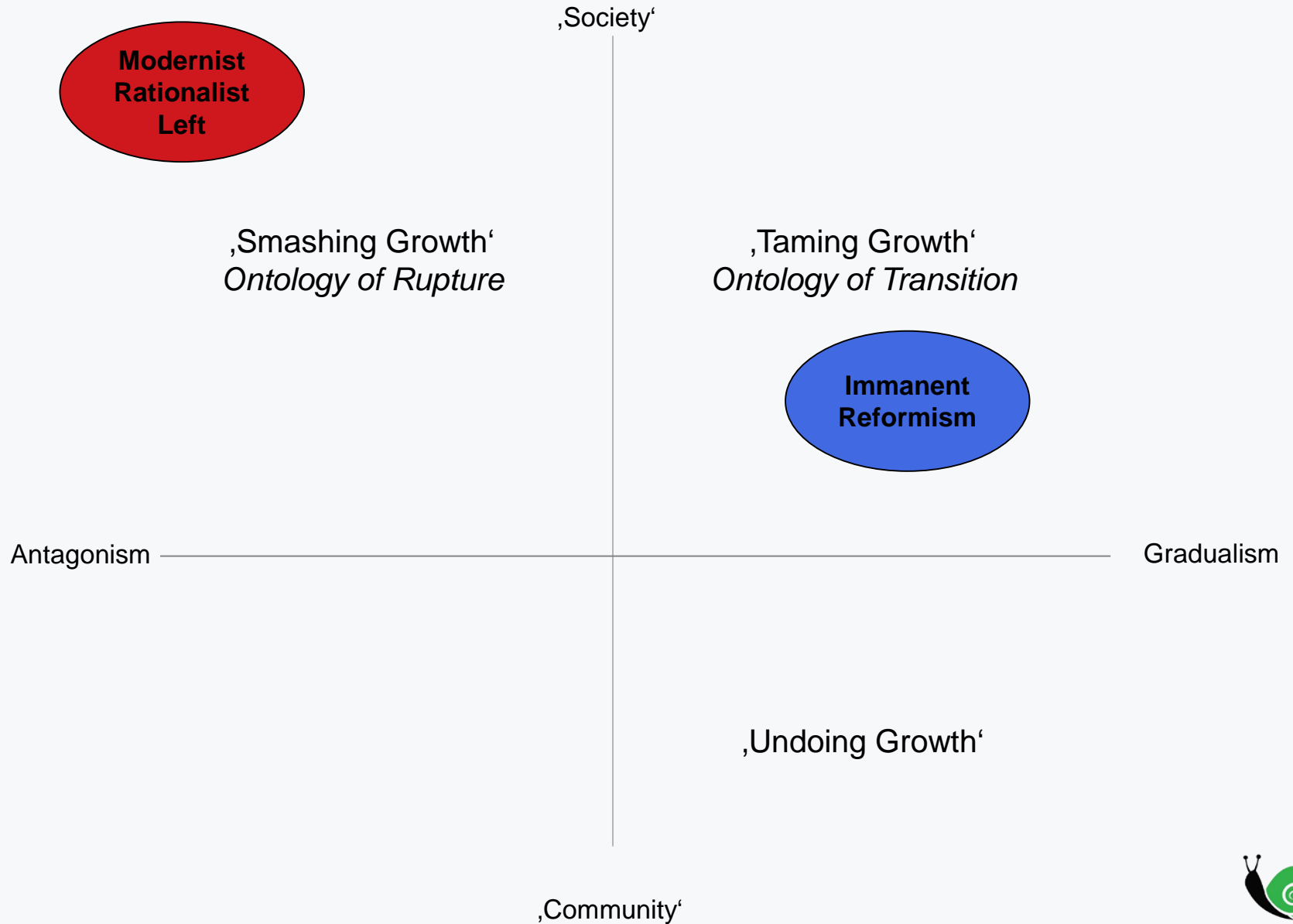
The Ontology of ‚Change' (‚Undoing Growth')

Image of society: The contingent aggregate effect of the everyday practices of a huge collection of individuals – liberal, individualist ontology

‚Growth' as a logic that structures those everyday practices just because everybody has become so used to it – once we think differently, we can also act differently

Societal nature relations: Ultimately depend on our will and choosing – both naturalist and ‚flat' ontologies possible

Theoretical references: Popular ‚post-growth' writing, individualist ‚lifestyle anarchism'

Image of transformation: Fair & sustainable practices, ‚viral' bottom-up change – ‚contaminationist' belief in inherent attractiveness of alternative practices

Subject(s): ‚Conscious' individuals, social innovators

Action: Changing personal behaviour, sustainable consumption, local projects, ‚value change' – 'first-person politics'

Historical prototype: Post-1968 New Social Movements

Actors within DG Spectrum: Young activists, student groups – ‚Voluntarist Pacifist Idealism'

Problems: Overestimating agency and underestimating power; limited appeal; no real opposition; ineffectuality due to insignificance

,Society'

Modernist Rationalist Left

,Smashing Growth'
Ontology of Rupture

,Taming Growth'
Ontology of Transition

Immanent Reformism

Antagonism ———————————————————— Gradualism

Voluntarist Pacifist Idealism

,Escaping/outliving Growth'

Growth'
Ontology of ,Change'
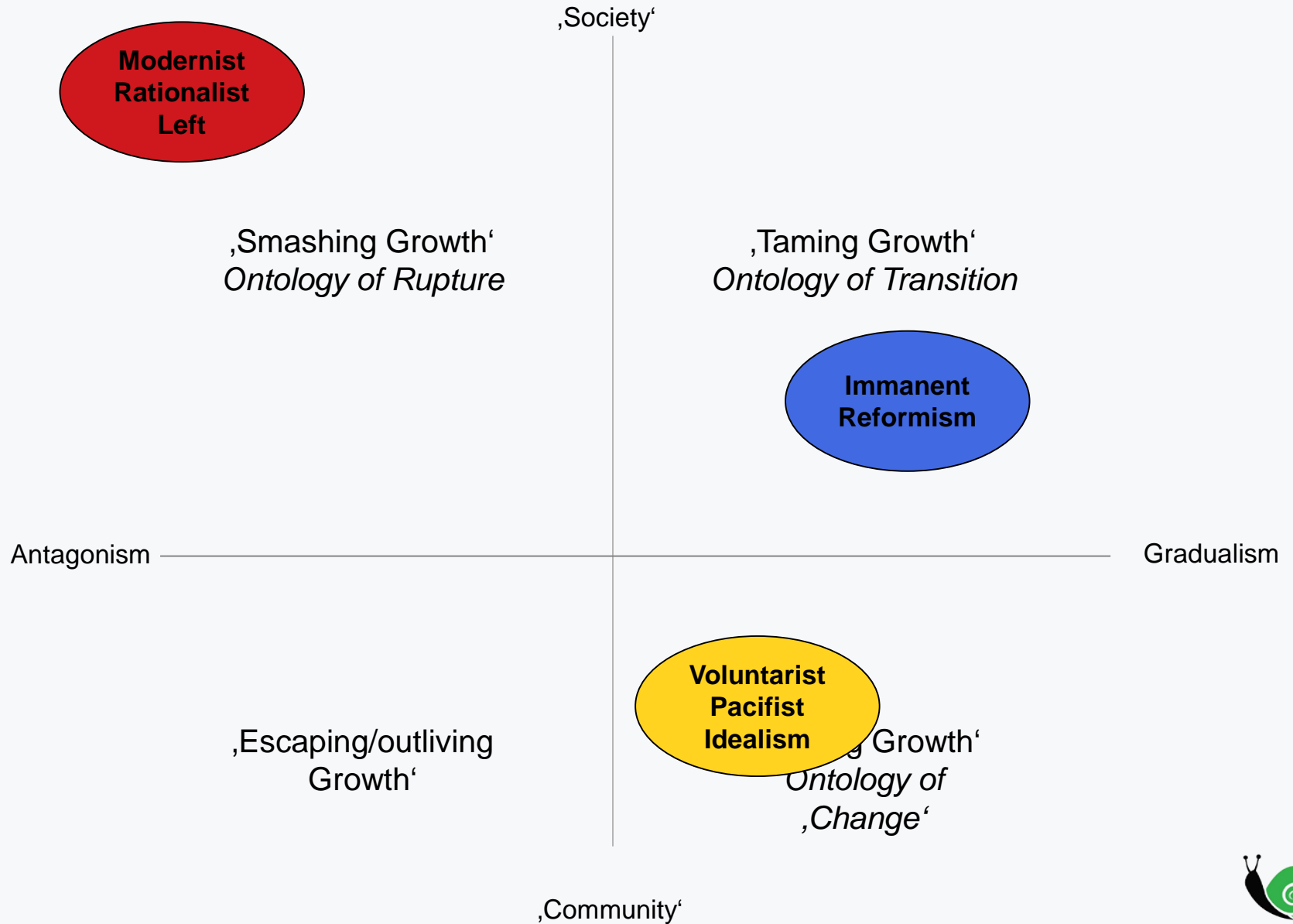
,Community'

The Ontology of Exodus ('Escaping/outliving Growth')

Image of society: Sharp contrast between abstract, alienated, destructive modern *society* and humane, diverse, harmonious *communities*

'Growth' as a predatory and destructive logic programmed into modernity & doomed to end in collapse

Societal nature relations: Normatively monist/holist ontology – humans need to rediscover their sameness with non-human nature, abandon naturalist ideology and re-found caring relations

Theoretical references: Deep ecology, strands of eco-feminist and decolonial thought

Image of transformation: Creating non-capitalist, transmodern futures/alternatives, building resilient communities that will outlive society when it collapses

Subject(s): 'Multitude', Pluriverse of resilient communities

Action: (Re-)creating communities; mutual help 'beyond' capitalist structures; epistemic critique

Historical prototype: Social Forums, resistant indigenous communities, Transition Towns

Actors: Movement veterans, eco-villagers, altermondialists – 'Sufficiency-oriented critique of civilization'

Problems: Romanticisation of nature & community; underestimation of societal power structure; partial overlap with regressive movements; ineffectuality due to strategic ineptness

'Society'

Modernist Rationalist Left (13%)

'Smashing Growth'
Ontology of Rupture

'Taming Growth'
Ontology of Transition

Immanent Reformism (19%)

Antagonism — Gradualism

Voluntarist Pacifist Idealism (23%)

'Escaping/outliving Growth'
Ontology of Exodus

Sufficiency-oriented Critique of Civilization (22%)

'Eroding Growth'
Ontology of 'Change'

'Community'
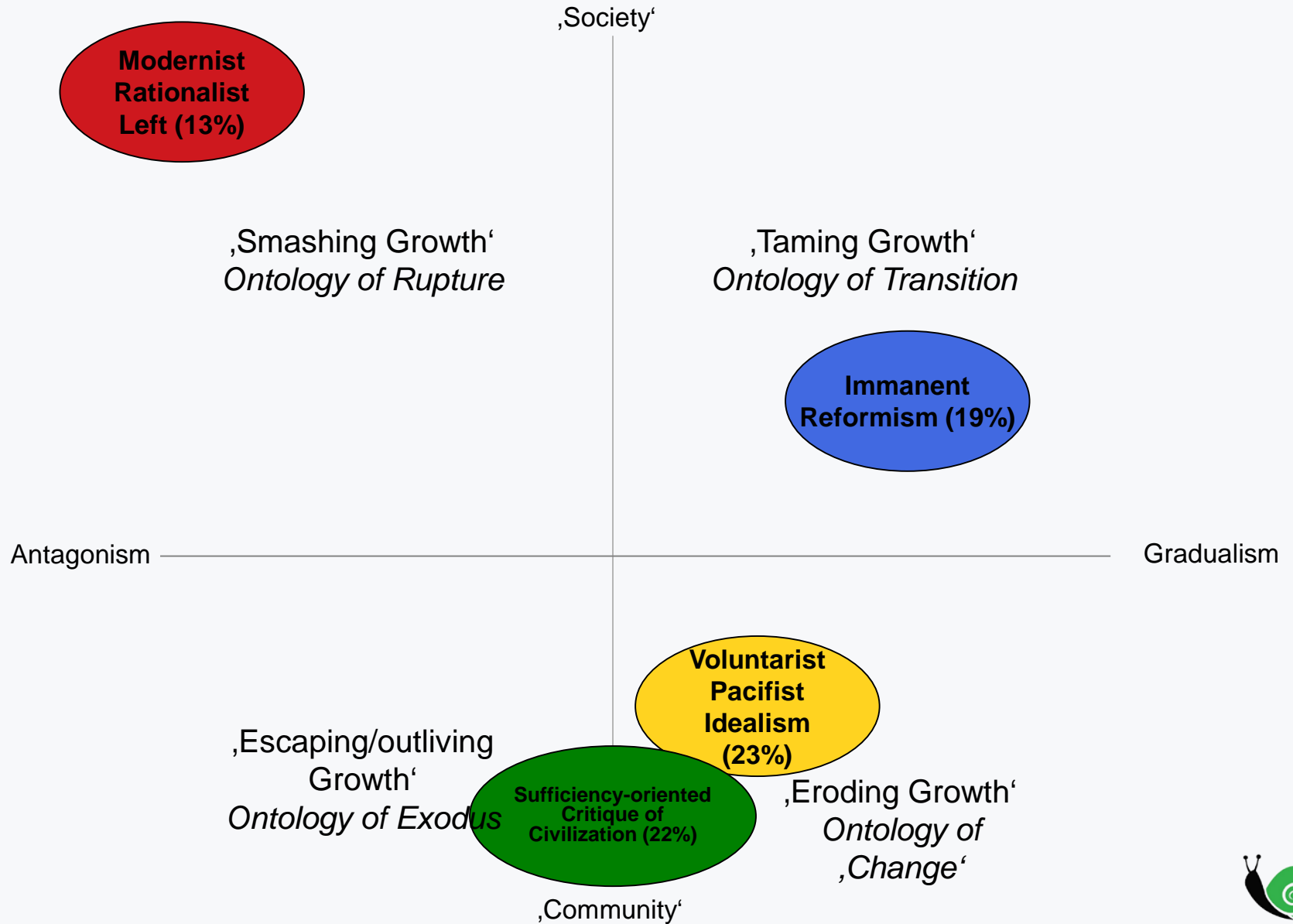
Four transformative ontologies – Lessons for degrowth

Rupture

+ Materialist attention to totality

- Theoretical absolutism (‚no right life amidst wrongs')

Transition

+ Pragmatic willingness to engage

- Belief in general viability of current arrangements

Ontology of
Phaseout

Exodus

+ Radical critique of ‚progress' & forces of production

- Expectations of collapse, partial proximity to regressive ideas

‚Change'

+ Personal responsibility & capacity to act
- Individualist underestimation of societal power structure

The Ontology of Phaseout

- Basic tenet: *Global Social and Environmental Justice requires pushing at all levels, and with all strategic tools at our disposal, for the phasing out and dismantling of relations of domination (both abstract and personal) and the unsustainable and unjust structures that they rest on*

  - Overcoming modern ‚separations' between public/private, production/reproduction, wage labor/care work etc. (Biesecker/Hofmeister), and the dominance and exploitation they enable

  - *„stabilize in time* a mode of regulation that is outside of, *against and beyond* the social order imposed by capitalism and the state" (Gutiérrez Aguilar, cited in Escobar 2015: 459)" – create a something that is more than merely the sum of communities and that enables emancipation – i.e. new, emancipatory modes of societalization

  - *Finding ways to critically deal with our own implication in modern capitalist society*

  - Overcoming *strategy* itself as a thoroughly modern idea based on the logic of war (Arendt) – the deliberately unpopular notion of *degrowth* itself stands for this

Eversberg, Dennis (2017): „Nach der Revolution. Degrowth und die Ontologie der Abwicklung". In *Kritik und Aktualität der Revolution*, herausgegeben von Martin Birkner und Thomas Seibert. Wien: Mandelbaum.

The Ontology of Phaseout (,dismantling the imperial mode of production and living')

Image of society: Complex global totality of relations of domination, appropriation and exploitation – stabilized and capable of being destabilized by collective practices

,Growth' as an abstract escalatory and appropriative logic or imperative inherent to the material, institutional and mental infrastructures of capitalist modernity

Societal nature relations: Critique of dualist ontologies from varying standpoints, ,flat' ontology not uncontested

Theoretical references: Core degrowth literature, radical transformation debates, social anarchism, Critical Theory, strands of decolonialism and feminism – plural

Image of transformation: Phasing out and dismantling the machineries and networks of growth and domination
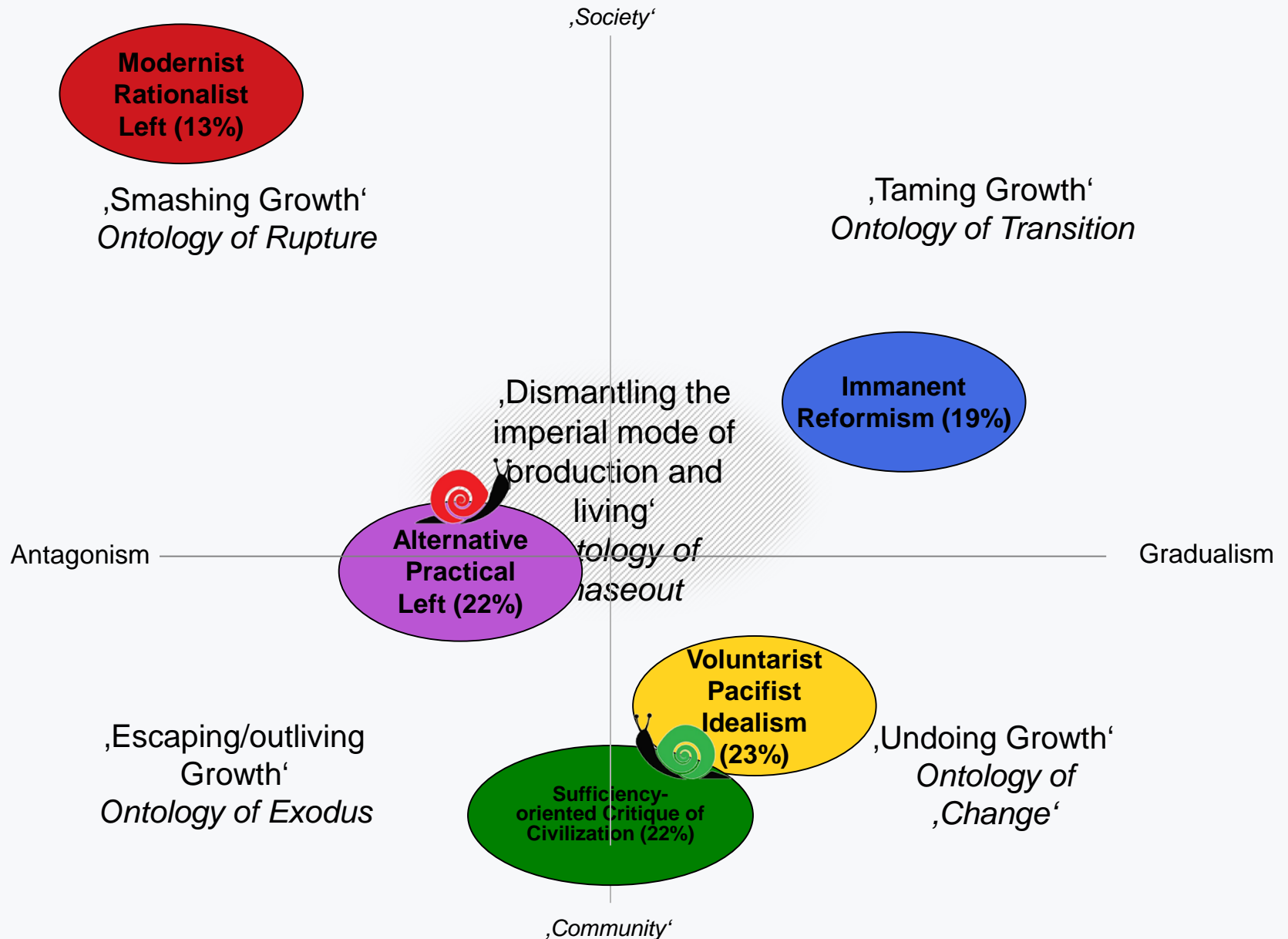
- Rearranging and repurposing parts, altering the relation with the environs (vs. 'smashing')
- Inventing structures & institutions based on what exists as platforms for new pathways (vs. 'taming')
- Ceding control over others' labour and domination of nature (vs. 'undoing')
- Radically challenging the *forces* of production (vs. 'escaping')

Action: not a specific type of action, but a *frame of reference* for different strategies

- Civil disobedience against extractive & destructive industries
- Radical policy proposals for ,non-reformist reforms' (basic services, DIA, maximum income, resource caps…)
- Prefigurative self-transformation – creating different environments to learn to invent community & society in new ways
- Self-organization projects at different scales

Historical prototype: Zapatistas or Rojava, if any

Actors: Feminists, anarchist-inspired groups, climate activists, new DG-specific actors – ,Alternative Practical Left'

,Society'

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Ontology of ,Change'

,Community'

Conclusions and questions for discussion

- Ontologies are socially situated and can be used for different social purposes

  - In a movement-like context like this, there is bound to be a tension between the collaborative use and creation of ontologies as 'commons' for pursuing common goals, and the instrumental use as tools for distinction toward other social groups, according to the competitive logic of 'surrounding' capitalist society

- The survey was conducted six years ago, and most participants were German

  - What do the findings mean for the transnational degrowth community?

  - What may have changed in the meantime?

- My take under the impression of debates around the Covid pandemic: ‚Alternative Practical Left' may be dividing up into

  - a current strongly inspired by decolonial and posthumanist debates, rooted in indigenous and ‚flat' ontologies and tending increasingly toward an ‚exodus' position expecting imminent societal collapse, and

  - A current that still attempts to straddle the antagonism-harmonism and society-community divides and further develop the ‚mixed' ontology of phaseout as a way to struggle for transformation „*in, against and beyond*" capitalist modernity, using the Covid crisis as window of opportunity to advance radical proposals and 'render the unthinkable thinkable' for broader societal strata (climate movement as a key conduit within the North)