

FORUM

Growth hegemony and post-growth futures: A complex hegemony approach

Michael J. Albert 

School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
Email: malbert@ed.ac.uk

(Received 28 September 2023; accepted 29 January 2024)

Abstract

To date, the vast majority of post-growth thinking has been focused on explaining *why* a post-growth transition is needed and the policies this would entail. Less attention, in contrast, has been paid to the relations of power and structural mechanisms through which ‘growth hegemony’ is continuously reproduced, and even less to the mechanisms, counter-hegemonic strategies, and coalitions that could plausibly drive post-growth transitions in core states of the world-system. This article will explore these issues through the lens of Neo-Gramscian theory, particularly the ‘complex hegemony’ framework developed by Alex Williams. From this perspective, rather than reducing growth to capitalist relations of production (as Marxists typically do), we should instead frame it as an emergent hegemonic structure and process shaped by the reciprocally determining forces of political economy, ideology, and militarisation. I will argue that this approach provides more insight into the messiness of possible post-growth futures – which may confound neat binaries such as capitalism/socialism – as well as the mechanisms and struggles through which the world-system might be pushed in post-growth directions.

Keywords: complexity; degrowth; economic growth; hegemony; Marxism; post-growth

Introduction

The available evidence suggests that a genuinely sustainable world economy must be ‘post-growth’, in the sense that it would not prioritise continuous compound increases in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and enable *at least* stabilisation if not radical reductions in material and energy throughput. Yet, as the introduction to this special issue shows, the field of International Relations (IR) has barely begun to engage with the problem of growth. This is unfortunate, since IR has an important role to play in analysing the challenges, constraints, and agential opportunities for transitioning to a post-growth world order.

Among ecological economists and others who have analysed the problem of growth, the focus has overwhelmingly been on *why* a post-growth transition is needed and the policies this may entail.¹ Less attention, in contrast, has been paid to the relations of power and structural mechanisms through which ‘growth hegemony’ is produced and reproduced at global and national scales,² and even less to the mechanisms, counter-hegemonic strategies, and coalitions that could

¹Herman Daly, *Steady-State Economics: Second Edition with New Essays* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1991); Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Giorgos Kallis and Jason Hickel, ‘Is green growth possible?’, *New Political Economy*, 25:4 (2020), pp. 469–86.

²For exceptions, see Mathias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Lorenzo Fioramonti, *The World after GDP* (London: Polity, 2017).

plausibly drive post-growth transitions in core states of the world-system. These are arguably the key problems where critical IR scholars are best positioned to contribute to broader debates on the problem of growth and the potential for post-growth futures.

I will argue that a Neo-Gramscian approach, aided by insights from complexity theory,³ is particularly well placed to analyse the underpinnings of growth hegemony and illuminate potential pathways to post-growth futures. This approach builds on ecological Marxist critiques of capital accumulation as the foundational driver of and constraint on addressing the earth-system crisis. But while Marxists tend to reduce economic growth to the social relations of production under capitalism,⁴ I will instead develop a multidimensional analysis of growth hegemony that highlights the reciprocal constitution between its political-economic, ideological, and security or geopolitical dimensions.

I will also suggest that by thinking about growth hegemony in this way, it is possible to envision post-growth transitions that do not entail a complete break with 'capitalism'. Marxists typically view compound growth as an 'iron law' of capitalism,⁵ and by extension the prospect of a 'zero-growth capitalism' as 'a logical and exclusionary contradiction'.⁶ This argument is not necessarily wrong, but it ignores the messy middle ground of hybrid political-economic formations that confound neat categories such as capitalism/socialism. In contrast, I will argue that a post-growth world order may be more fruitfully understood as a pluralist political-economic 'ecology' with a new set of emergent power relations and patterns for the world-system as a whole.

From structural Marxism to complex hegemony

Economic growth can be understood as a 'hegemonic' discourse in the Gramscian sense, or a discourse that translates 'idealized class viewpoints ... into a strategic orientation for society as a whole'.⁷ It is a 'core state imperative' that is almost universally viewed as necessary or legitimate (even by many who oppose capitalism).⁸ Yet many Marxists would question the utility of the concept of 'growth hegemony'. Just as Neo-Gramscians are often critiqued for exaggerating the importance of ideology at the expense of capitalist structure,⁹ so do Marxists often critique those who view economic growth as an ideologically driven *choice* rather than a *structural economic compulsion* under capitalism. From this view, analysts who focus their critique on growth are guilty of fixating on the ideological superstructure while diverting attention away from the underlying social relations of production that drive it. As Richard Smith puts it:

growthmania is hardly just a dogma, an ideology, a fetish ... [it] is a rational and succinct expression of the day-to-day requirements of capitalist reproduction everywhere and in any conceivable capitalism.¹⁰

Marxists do not deny that growth has an ideological component, but they argue that this is merely a post-hoc justification for a structural feature of capitalism that does not possess any causal force.

³E.g. Alex Williams, *Political Hegemony and Social Complexity: Mechanisms of Power after Gramsci* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁴E.g. David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Richard Smith, *Green Capitalism: The God That Failed* (London: College Publications, 2016); Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).

⁵Smith, *Green Capitalism*, p. 27.

⁶Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions*, p. 232.

⁷Kees Van Der Pijl, 'Ruling classes, hegemony, and the state system', *International Journal of Political Economy* (1989), pp. 7–35 (p. 8).

⁸John Barry, 'A genealogy of economic growth as ideology and Cold War core state imperative', *New Political Economy*, 25:1 (2020), pp. 18–29.

⁹Peter Burnham, 'Neo-Gramscian hegemony and the international order', *Capital & Class*, 15:3 (1991), pp. 73–93.

¹⁰Smith, *Green Capitalism*, p. 35.

‘Growth ideology’, as Ian Angus writes, ‘doesn’t *cause* perpetual accumulation – it *justifies* it.’¹¹ This is a key reason why Marxists are often critical of degrowth and steady-state economy discourses, which implicitly emphasise *growth* rather than *capitalism* as the main problem to be overcome.

There is much truth to the structural Marxist story. At least since the early 19th century, there has never existed a form of capitalism that does not rely on continuous expansion. Periods of zero or negative growth have always been considered junctures of capitalist ‘crisis’, leading to plummeting levels of investment, rising unemployment, and social instability.¹² But by framing growth as merely an emergent effect of the capital relation, Marxists give us a simplified account of capitalist structure that is unable to grasp how growth is continuously reproduced and how it can be challenged (short of worldwide socialist revolution). On one hand, it errs by ignoring or at best downplaying the role of culture, ideology, and geopolitical processes in co-constituting emergent capitalist structures. As Terry Leahy writes, ‘capitalism is not just a set of economic structures and legislative procedures but is animated by a cultural logic ... ideas and economic structures are inseparably linked’.¹³ On the other, it leads Marxists to ignore near-term reforms and sites of struggle (beyond the capital–labour relation) that could weaken the hegemony of growth, thus overlooking potentially important mechanisms of post-growth transformation.

In contrast, a Neo-Gramscian framework, shaped by insights from complexity theory, can provide a more useful framework for analysing and informing struggles against growth hegemony. From this view – which we can call, following Alex Williams, a ‘complex hegemony’ lens – growth is not simply reducible to the capital relation but is rather a complex hegemonic order in its own right that emerges from the feedbacks between political-economic, ideological, and geopolitical structures and processes.¹⁴ In other words, growth emerges in part from the social relations of production that drive competitive capital accumulation but is also in part constituted and reproduced by ideologies, infrastructures, geopolitical pressures, and forms of knowledge that make growth appear natural, necessary, and legitimate (even among many anti-capitalists). Rather than simply taking for granted the primacy of GDP growth under capitalism, this perspective recognises, as Mathias Schmelzer demonstrates, that growth has been

continuously renegotiated and remade in an open and contingent process characterized by historical ruptures, competing theories, and counter-currents, in which the growth paradigm proved remarkably flexible in adapting to changing circumstances, integrating newly emerging problems and perspectives without changing its basic tenets.¹⁵

In other words, growth has been an ongoing hegemonic project – a complex adaptive network of discourses, theories, statistical standards, affective dispositions, and cosmological orientations – that must continuously reproduce itself in the face of material shifts (e.g. the end of the Cold War and the rise of the climate crisis) and counter-hegemonic challenges (e.g. critiques of GDP that rose to prominence with the 1972 *Limits to Growth* report and have become increasingly widespread over the past decade).¹⁶ Challenging this project requires a multidimensional analysis of its structural drivers and the agential processes through which these structures are reproduced, which can help identify points of leverage where post-growth movements must intervene in order to push the world-system towards alternative post-growth futures.

¹¹ Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, p. 113.

¹² Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions*.

¹³ Terry Leahy, ‘Radical reformism and the Marxist critique’, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 29:2 (2018), pp. 61–74 (pp. 71–2).

¹⁴ Williams, *Political Hegemony*; see also Michael Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis: Mapping the Futures of Capitalism and the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024).

¹⁵ Schmelzer, *Hegemony of Growth*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Bentley Allan, *Scientific Cosmologies and World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

The bases of growth hegemony

To broadly schematise, I will suggest that growth hegemony is reproduced by the reciprocal confluence of political-economic structure, ideology, and militarisation, though each of these sites is itself complex and multidimensional. Starting with political-economic structure, this refers to emergent disciplinary mechanisms that pressure individual firms, states, and the world economy as a whole to adopt continuous growth as their default state in order to avoid 'existential' consequences.¹⁷ Marxists capture the microeconomic drivers of this growth imperative: capitalists are pressured by the force of market competition to re-invest their profits in expanding production and reaching wider markets, and so on in a continuous circuit of self-expanding value.¹⁸ But a growth imperative for individual firms 'does not translate automatically into a macroeconomic one,'¹⁹ which requires the mediation of states. The modern state, as structurally coupled to and co-emergent with capital, is dependent on continuous capital accumulation to amass tax revenues, finance infrastructure and welfare spending, and maintain social stability.²⁰ Furthermore, given capitalism's systemic tendency to invest in labour-saving technology, leading to periodic bouts of technological unemployment, growth has historically been necessary to compensate for lost jobs by expanding the overall scale of the economy.²¹ Financialisation and rising levels of private and public debt further exacerbate system-level pressures to pursue growth, since growth is needed to pay off accumulated debts and avoid financial crises.

These political-economic pressures by themselves, however, do not constitute a sufficient explanation of growth, as structural Marxists believe. At the microeconomic level, the 'growth imperative' for individual firms arises from the capitalist pursuit of so-called 'reasonable or normal' profit rates.²² But what constitutes 'reasonable or normal' profits is in part socially constructed – shaped by culture, ideology, and history – rather than being inherently structural or ahistorical. In other terms, phenomena such as capital flight, investment strikes, and economic crises are not automatic structural features of low profit rates, but rather *agency-infused processes* that emerge from both economic pressures *and* culturally/historically conditioned expectations. At the macroeconomic level, there is no doubt that states are pressured to pursue growth, though this may be less of an 'iron law' than believed by structural Marxists. For instance, the example of Japan – which has seen its GDP nearly plateau since the 1990s – shows that capitalist states can remain relatively stable and prosperous amidst conditions of zero growth, even without intentionally pursuing structural post-growth reforms.²³ The lesson is that states are not only structurally compelled to grow, but also actively *choose* growth.²⁴ In other words, governments, firms, and (more controversially, for Marxists) consumers exercise agency in ways that continuously reproduce growth hegemony, and their agency is conditioned by ideology.

Ideology here is not simply taken to mean ideas and beliefs at the level of conscious reflection, but also the embodied and affective level of daily practices, habits, and forms of knowledge.²⁵ For instance, the ideological and infrastructural power of GDP statistics – seen in their power to drive investment decisions, attract continuous media coverage, and shape assumptions about the 'health' of a state's 'economy' – is a critical dimension of growth hegemony, which has been

¹⁷ Oliver Richters and Andreas Siemoneit, 'Growth imperatives: Substantiating a contested concept', *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*, 51 (2019), pp. 126–37.

¹⁸ Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions*; Smith, *Green Capitalism*.

¹⁹ Richters and Siemoneit, 'Growth imperatives', p. 131.

²⁰ Dan Bailey, 'Re-thinking the fiscal and monetary political economy of the green state', *New Political Economy*, 25:1 (2020), pp. 5–17.

²¹ Richters and Siemoneit, 'Growth imperatives'.

²² Peter Ferguson, *Post-Growth Politics: A Critical Theoretical and Policy Framework for Decarbonisation* (Cham: Springer, 2018), p. 81.

²³ David Pilling, 'Japan finds there is more to life than growth', *Financial Times* (2011), available at <https://www.ft.com/content/6152b9ca-1904-11e0-9c12-00144feab49a#axzz1ChRCq31X>.

²⁴ Leahy, 'Radical reformism'.

²⁵ Williams, *Political Hegemony*.

extensively analysed.²⁶ But we can identify at least three other ways in which ideology works to reinforce growth hegemony, and which thereby constitute sites of political agency in the struggle for post-growth futures.

First is in the culture of capitalists themselves, or their socially and historically conditioned expectations of what constitutes ‘reasonable or normal’ profit rates. Post-growth but pro-market economists such as Herman Daly typically identify low profit rates as a key feature of post-growth economies, along with maximum income caps and basic income floors.²⁷ In current conditions, these policies would trigger capital flight, but coordinated capital controls among states and stronger regulations on corporate governance (e.g. corporate charter reforms that follow ‘B Corporation’ principles) could at least in theory force capital to accept limits on rates of profit.²⁸ We should not expect capitalists to willingly shift from ruthless profit-seeking to more enlightened stewardship, but a combination of social movement struggle, coordinated state regulation, and longer-term cultural transformation could plausibly force capitalists to adapt to a low-profit world.

Second is in the culture and expectations of mass consumerism as the path to ‘the good life’. As Kate Soper argues, critical theorists cannot ignore the role of consumerist culture in reproducing growth societies, which risks hypostatising the process of growth – making it seem ‘as if capital itself were responsible and acting autonomously’ – while also abstracting ‘from the everyday life of ordinary people, either in their role as consumers or in their electoral support for the system’.²⁹ Growth hegemony is resilient in part because of ordinary peoples’ desires for rising living standards measured according to income and purchasing power. Post-growth transitions would therefore only be possible in a context of a ‘cultural revolution’ driven by ‘revised conceptions of progress, prosperity, development and the good life’.³⁰ Such cultural transformations are most essential in the ‘overdeveloped’ regions of the Global North. But given the extension of consumerist desires and energy-intensive modes of living across the ‘emerging’ economies of the Global South, comparable yet distinctive cultural shifts will be needed there as well (which, it must be emphasised, does not by any stretch mean giving up aspirations for a better life, but rather pursuing alternatives to the West’s ecologically disastrous and socially atomising trajectory, as Frantz Fanon and numerous anti-colonial thinkers have called for).³¹

Third is the cosmology of ‘Progress’ as equated with or at least reliant on economic growth.³² This is arguably the deepest dimension of growth hegemony, since it is rooted in fears of (both individual and collective) death, provoking libidinal and existential investments in grand civilisational projects that will persist long after our lives as human individuals. Growth from this view is not merely an economically desirable goal, but more deeply a source of meaning in life and ultimate value, connected to fears of human insignificance and desires for indefinite expansion and survival in an inhuman cosmos. Attachments to growth in this sense undeniably have a mythical or religious quality, as many commentators have pointed out,³³ which helps us account for the irrational or extra-rational dimension of growth commitments. Challenging growth must therefore be about more than rational argument: it must also point the way towards alternative sources of meaning, value, and orientation in relation to the earth and cosmos.

²⁶ E.g. Fioramonti, *World after GDP*; Schmelzer, *Hegemony of Growth*.

²⁷ Daly, *Steady-State Economics*; Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*; Victor, *Managing without Growth*.

²⁸ Ferguson, *Post-Growth Politics*.

²⁹ Kate Soper, *Post Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020), p. 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 252, 254.

³² Allan, *Scientific Cosmology*.

³³ E.g. Jeremy Lent, *The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity's Search for Meaning* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2017); Tim Jackson, *Post Growth: Life after Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

Finally, we must also include the geopolitical or security parameter as a relatively autonomous dimension of growth hegemony. This refers to the structural coupling between the 'core state imperatives' of economic growth and security,³⁴ or the reliance of the latter on the former. As Schmelzer and others demonstrate, the rise to prominence of GDP growth in the mid-20th century was driven at least as much (if not more) by geopolitical and security considerations – mainly competition between the capitalist and communist blocs – than by economic imperatives alone.³⁵ In short, as realist IR scholars emphasise, economic growth is foundational to a state's military power and security vis-à-vis its geopolitical rivals.³⁶ The argument that economic growth is a necessary precondition of peace and security in conflict-prone societies in the Global South forms an additional way in which security considerations help reproduce growth hegemony, as Dahlia Simangan discusses.³⁷ We need not follow neo-realists in identifying a structurally determined and asocial security-growth imperative, since these pressures are also determined by history, state socialisation, and identities.³⁸ But there is no question that a context of worsening geopolitical rivalries reinforces growth hegemony. For instance, the European Union (EU) – arguably the most fertile political context in the Global North for post-growth movements – is now ramping up military spending to shore up its eastern defences following Putin's invasion of Ukraine. This will almost certainly reinforce growth hegemony in the EU by supporting the narrative that growth is essential to avoid distributional conflicts between military, social, and ecological spending. In China, whose hybrid state capitalist/market socialist political economy makes it in theory less beholden to a structural growth imperative, high GDP growth rates are nonetheless seen as essential not only to deliver rising living standards but also to modernise its military, advance its regional territorial claims, and confront an increasingly aggressive United States.³⁹ Yet, as the former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd points out, military modernisation 'is undeniably a major drain on [China's] budget ... Sustained long-term economic growth in the vicinity of 5 to 6 percent annually is, therefore, essential for achieving these core objectives.'⁴⁰ A new 'Cold War' with the United States is thus potentially catastrophic, due to both the risks of military conflagration it creates as well as the GDP growth pressures it reinforces, which would ensure rising streams of material-energy throughput and pollution from these planet-eating behemoths.

Toward post-growth futures

Given the foregoing analysis, what might plausible and coherent post-growth futures look like? From a structural Marxist perspective, the answer is fairly simple: they must be 'ecosocialist', defined as political economies in which production decisions are democratically controlled so that sustainably meeting human needs (rather than profit and growth) is the overriding priority.⁴¹ This view is not necessarily wrong, but it begs the question of the precise threshold between 'capitalism' and 'ecosocialism', or at what point the former passes into the latter. Perhaps surprisingly, Marxists rarely provide clear answers to such questions – instead relying on abstractions such as the predominance of use value over exchange value. Robyn Eckersley provides a useful articulation of the problem: 'how much does public power need to take over from private power before we can describe the green state-society complex as post-capitalist? I'm not sure, and I'm not sure it

³⁴ Barry, 'Genealogy of economic growth'.

³⁵ Schmelzer, *Hegemony of Growth*; Barry, 'Genealogy of economic growth'.

³⁶ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (London: W.W. Norton, 2001).

³⁷ Dahlia Simangan, 'Post-Growth Peacebuilding: Greening or Greenwashing Peace?'

³⁸ Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425.

³⁹ Kevin Rudd, *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China* (New York: Public Affairs, 2022).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 113.

⁴¹ Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*.

matters.⁴² I agree with Eckersley that labels such as capitalist and post-capitalist, while necessary to a degree, only take us so far when dealing with complex, messy, and hybrid political-economic systems. Arguably, the more interesting and relevant question is not so much whether a ‘post-growth capitalism’ is possible, which is largely a matter of semantics, but rather what configuration of political economy, security, ideology, and other elements may cohere to produce a viable post-growth ‘equilibrium’ for individual states and the world-system as a whole.

The analysis above suggests that the struggle for post-growth futures is in one sense easier, and in another more challenging, than the struggle against capitalism. To start, a post-growth political economy, while certainly constituting a radical break from the past two centuries of capitalist development, would not necessarily require the abolition of core capitalist institutions such as profit, markets, private property, and wage labour. Instead, it could be characterised as a more pluralist political economy in which capitalist institutions are constrained so that profit and accumulation are subordinated to alternative state functions – including sustainability, security, and social welfare.⁴³ For instance, in his analysis of the macroeconomic conditions for stable post-growth economies, Steffen Lange shows that this would require worker cooperatives playing a larger role in the economy (which can reinvest revenues in increased wages, improved working conditions, and decreased working hours rather than further accumulation); governments introducing strict caps on material throughput; smaller and medium-size firms treated preferentially by disincentivising economies of scale; regulating money creation to channel finance into key sectors and prevent excessive debt accumulation; and significantly reducing inequality by enforcing maximum and minimum income levels.⁴⁴ The private corporation, capital accumulation, wage labour, and markets would continue to exist, but their influence over the political economy as a whole would be counterbalanced and constrained by an enlarged public sector, stronger state support for worker cooperatives, and the growth of a ‘commoning’ sector from below – composed of locally controlled resource-provisioning systems managed for communal benefit (e.g. community gardens, communal kitchens, energy cooperatives, solidarity health clinics).⁴⁵ Some corporations may even benefit: as a *Harvard Business Review* editorial claims, “de-growth” shouldn’t scare businesses, since post-growth transitions would ‘reshuffl[e] competitive dynamics within and across industries, offering ‘new bases for competitive advantage’ – for instance, by benefiting firms who pursue ‘degrowth-adapted product design’ involving products that are locally produced, have longer lifespans, and can be freely repaired.⁴⁶

Marxists may counter that this hybrid political economy would be an unstable formation rife with contradictions and vulnerable to renewed capitalist expansion and the reassertion of its priorities over the rest of society.⁴⁷ They may be right, in which case this would be merely a ‘transitional’ phase on the way towards full abolition of capitalist power (or back towards capitalist business-as-usual). But we cannot know in advance what forms of hybrid political economy might emerge and how (un)stable they would be. In contrast to structural Marxism, a complex hegemony perspective counsels humility towards our ability to know the future, an appreciation of the messiness of actually existing political economies, and an openness towards hybrid post-growth futures that may defy neat categories such as capitalism/socialism.⁴⁸

⁴² Robyn Eckersley, ‘The state as gatekeeper’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 2:2 (2006), pp. 127–138 (p. 134).

⁴³ Eckersley, ‘The state’.

⁴⁴ Steffen Lange, *Macroeconomics without Growth: Sustainable Economies in Neoclassical, Keynesian and Marxian Theories* (Marburg: Metropolis-Verlag, 2018), pp. 527–8.

⁴⁵ Michael Lewis and Pat Conaty, *The Resilience Imperative: Cooperative Transitions to a Steady-State Economy* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2012).

⁴⁶ Thomas Roulet and Joel Bothello, ‘Why “de-growth” shouldn’t scare businesses’, *Harvard Business Review* (2020), available at <https://hbr.org/2020/02/why-de-growth-shouldnt-scare-businesses>.

⁴⁷ Leahy, ‘Radical reformism’.

⁴⁸ This perspective also dovetails with Erik Olin Wright’s ‘combinatorial structuralist’ or hybridist approach to political economy. See Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010), chapter 5.

But in addition to these political-economic transformations, a post-growth future would require comparably radical transitions in the nature of geopolitics, security, culture, and ideology. For one, it is almost certainly not compatible with a new ‘Cold War’ between the United States and China and worsening geopolitical rivalries in Eastern Europe, East Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. In the present context, it is difficult to envision how these rivalries might be tempered. But in a future of worsening climate shocks, protracted stagflationary pressures, and strengthening labour and climate justice movements, it *may* be possible for these movements to push states to cooperatively pursue post-growth transitions that accelerate decarbonisation and reverse global militarisation.⁴⁹ Yet such shifts in political economy and geopolitics could only be enabled by ideological and cultural shifts towards alternative cosmologies, values, and understandings of ‘prosperity’ and ‘security’.

How, then, might shifts in political economy, security, and ideology seed the emergence of a post-growth world order? And in what future conditions? Following Bentley Allan, I agree that ongoing political-economic and cosmological shifts driven by green industrial policy can create the conditions for longer-term post-growth transformation.⁵⁰ But to get there, at least three further mechanisms of transformation are required: (1) a deepening crisis of capitalism driven by intensifying climate shocks, energy and food crises, aging populations, and accumulating financial system risks, which over time makes it increasingly challenging for rich countries (including China) to grow their economies and maintain social stability; (2) changing conceptions of ‘security’ in an age of ecological breakdown, which increasingly prioritise climate protection and economic, energy, and food security more than geopolitical competition; and (most importantly) (3) strengthening networks of labour and climate justice movements that, together with progressive policymakers and elements of green capital, form a counter-hegemonic bloc capable of advancing post-growth and demilitarisation platforms in core states of the world-system.

In order to elaborate these mechanisms, I will develop a future scenario that can help illuminate how they might facilitate post-growth transformations in practice. To clarify, scenarios are not ‘predictions’ but rather plausible and internally coherent narratives about possible futures that can inform planning, strategy, and activism in the present.⁵¹

In this scenario, by 2027 the world-system continues to confront multiple intersecting crises in the form of historically high oil and gas prices, stagnant growth and inflation, intensifying climate shocks, and food-system disruption. But rather than the ‘all of the above’ energy strategies adopted in response to the 2022 energy price shock, the ‘new normal’ of expensive oil and gas – combined with increasingly competitive renewables and social movement pressure – pushes states to accelerate the energy transition and enact a global agreement to phase-down all fossil fuels. The result is that global emissions peak and begin falling on average by 3 per cent per year – not fast enough for hitting net zero by 2050,⁵² but a big step in the right direction. Relations between the United States and China thaw but remain tense, reaching a new normal of ‘managed strategic competition.’⁵³ Meanwhile, as the energy transition accelerates, Putin’s Russia faces collapsing export revenues from fossil fuels, economic decline, and internal unrest among elites and the broader population, forcing it into a peace settlement favourable to Ukraine and constricting its geopolitical ambitions.

Yet these economic, energy, and geopolitical shifts are insufficient to prevent worsening systemic crises as we enter the 2030s. Continuous progress in renewable energy technologies provide the promise of cheap and abundant clean energy, but getting closer to 100 per cent renewable electricity requires massive upfront investments in battery storage, new transmission lines, and flexible demand management capacities, which feed into rising electricity prices – perhaps amplifying

⁴⁹ Michael Albert, ‘The global politics of the renewable energy transition and the non-substitutability hypothesis: Towards a “great transformation”?’ *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:5 (2022), 1766–81.

⁵⁰ Bentley Allan, ‘After Growth: Formations of Alternative Political Economy’.

⁵¹ For a fuller elaboration of scenario methodologies, see Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis*.

⁵² Kallis and Hickel, ‘Is green growth possible?’

⁵³ Rudd, *Avoidable War*.

prices by 25 per cent between 2020 and 2040, as McKinsey forecasts.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the accelerated energy transition requires a huge mining expansion to provide copper, lithium, rare earths, cobalt, and other ‘transition metals’, leading to supply gaps that cannot be met rapidly by new mining projects with their long lead times (as the IEA anticipates).⁵⁵ At the same time, rising atmospheric CO₂ levels mean that the world is now dealing with the consequences of 1.5°C warming, manifesting in the form of record-shattering heatwaves and floods, worsening crop failures, and compound events that serve to amplify pre-existing energy and economic crises (e.g. by diminishing hydropower production, amplifying electricity demands for air conditioning, and disrupting clean energy supply chains).⁵⁶ The result is that most states continue to face energy insecurity, stubbornly high inflation combined with stagnant growth, and worsening climate extremes.

In this context, an increasingly well-organised coalition of climate justice movements, trade unions, scientists, heterodox economists, and progressive business leaders in the Euro-American core are able to advance a more radical policy agenda. Their core narrative is that GDP growth is both unnecessary for collective welfare and a critical constraint on addressing the climate and energy crises; instead, energy demand reduction can improve energy security while accelerating the renewable energy transition, states can supplant GDP with alternative indicators of collective welfare, policy experimentation with shorter work weeks and Universal Basic Income can ensure economic security and public support for an accelerated transition, and states can pay for it in the absence of GDP growth by adopting ‘Modern Monetary Theory’ principles.⁵⁷ Green social democratic coalitions take power and begin implementing these post-growth programmes in Germany, France, Spain, and Sweden. With the threat of Russian aggression waning, military build-up is no longer widely viewed as necessary for EU security, thus freeing up resources for accelerated decarbonisation and weakening security-based arguments for GDP growth in these states.

Despite early hiccups resulting from capital flight, the early adopters in Europe demonstrate that post-growth political economies can deliver energy security, decarbonisation, and collective welfare more adequately than their growth-based counterparts. By 2040, the United Kingdom, most of Europe, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand – dealing with their own protracted stagflation crises, magnified by aging populations – follow suit. The United States remains wary, given its powerful corporate lobbies and expansive military commitments (particularly vis-à-vis China). In China, an influential faction within the Chinese Communist Party views post-growth as a feasible and necessary strategy to manage its worsening ecological crises and enhance its energy and food sovereignty (i.e. by reducing demand and reorienting domestic production towards socially necessary sectors), though military competition with the United States and hawkish national security factions keep this policy out of reach.

But by the early 2040s, both the US and China are facing unprecedented domestic crises and increasingly powerful grassroots opposition to both capitalism *and* militarisation, since military spending is by this time widely reviled for diverting resources away from social and ecological spending and exacerbating the climate crisis through rising military emissions.⁵⁸ Worsening economic precarity and intensifying climate extremes convince populations in these countries that economic, energy, and climate security are far more pressing concerns than military competition. At the same time, the United States and China confront energy, mineral, and budgetary constraints (that is, following monetary orthodoxy) that challenge their efforts to simultaneously pursue socio-economic, ecological, and military-strategic objectives. Pushed in part by increasingly widespread and disruptive protests from below, as well as by changing conceptions of security and core interests

⁵⁴ Mekala Krishnan, Hamid Samandari, Jonathan Woetzel, et al., *The Net-Zero Transition: What It Would Cost, What It Could Bring* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2022), p. viii.

⁵⁵ International Energy Agency (IEA), *The Role of Critical Metals in Clean Energy Transitions* (Paris: IEA, 2021).

⁵⁶ World Meteorological Organization, *2022 State of Climate Services: Energy* (Geneva: WMO, 2022).

⁵⁷ Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save The World* (London: Windmill Books, 2021); Bailey, ‘Re-thinking the fiscal’; Albert, *Navigating the Polycrisis*.

⁵⁸ Albert, ‘The global politics of renewable energy’.

among policymakers, the United States and China eventually recognise that it is in their mutual interests to cooperatively reduce military spending while focusing on energy security, domestic stability, and social welfare at home. Thus they join with the EU and other governments to catalyse a 'new Bretton Woods' that aims to institutionalise a new post-growth world order – e.g. by enhancing national autonomy over economic and social policy through strengthened capital controls, implementing corporate charter reforms that force corporations to prioritise long-term sustainability over short-term profits, agreeing to coordinated caps on material and energy throughput, and enshrining stronger protections for labour and Indigenous rights. Governments across the Global South, while supportive of northern efforts to reduce their material-energy throughputs (which increases their own ecological space for development), are also concerned with falling export revenues and worsening debt crises as rich countries shift towards more localised and sufficiency-oriented economies (a risk that Chukwumerije Okereke highlights in his contribution to this issue). But freed from the artificial scarcity of money, the United States, EU, and China agree to cancel or restructure unsustainable debts and ramp up finance for climate mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage for developing countries. In turn, freed from structural indebtedness in foreign currencies, and aided by south–south trade and industrial partnerships, these states are then able to build up their own green industrial capacities rather than remaining reliant on Western or Chinese technology, increase their food and energy sovereignty, shift away from export-led extractivism, and pursue new forms of development based on 'a broad dashboard of environmental, social, and economic indicators focused on quality of life and resilience'.⁵⁹

Along the way, cultural and ideological shifts take root across the world-system. Coordinated state regulation enforces and eventually normalises low-profit rates in a shrunken corporate and financial sector, while the cognitive-affective impacts of protracted electricity, gas, and food price inflation revive values like thrift and sufficiency among consumers in the Global North and strengthen the view that governments should guarantee access to basic needs. The introduction of policies such as Universal Basic Income and shorter work weeks – while not completely freeing workers from wage labour – provide households with greater economic security and allow individuals to devote more time to leisure as well as commoning initiatives such as community gardening and ecosystem restoration. With the threat of unemployment reduced, labour-market competition dampened, and opportunities for community-oriented care and reproductive work enhanced, individualism gradually gives way to more collectivist values. As polls in the early 2020s showed,⁶⁰ the majority of citizens in rich countries had always instinctively favoured environmental protection, health care, and social well-being more than economic growth, but the relaxation of capital's disciplinary mechanisms finally enabled them to consistently vote these priorities into office. Having initially been triggered by worsening climate–energy–food–stagflation crises, over time rich world populations find new sources meaning and satisfaction in these alternative ways of life, which are given further resilience by shifts in Western cosmologies of linear 'Progress' towards alternative notions of ecological interdependence, circularity, and planetary stewardship.⁶¹

Overall, by the 2050s a post-growth world order emerges that has achieved net zero emissions, dampened geopolitical tensions and significantly reduced military spending, and institutionalised new cultures of sufficiency and stewardship. Across this landscape, we can see a diverse array of post-growth political economies (just as there are numerous 'varieties of capitalism' today): including relatively liberal and market-entrepreneurial variants of the 'steady-state' economy, coordinated social democratic economies with a stronger role for state-led planning and redistribution, authoritarian statist post-growth economies, and perhaps also more radically anti-capitalist ecosocialist

⁵⁹ Fadhel Kaboub, 'Africa's path towards resilience and sovereignty: The real Wakanda is within reach', *Tax Justice Network* (30 March 2021), available at: <https://taxjustice.net/2021/03/30/africas-path-towards-resilience-and-sovereignty-the-real-wakanda-is-within-reach/>.

⁶⁰ Lily Paulson and Milena Buchs, 'Public acceptance of post-growth: Factors and implications for post-growth strategy', *Futures*, 43 (2022), pp. 1–15.

⁶¹ Allan, 'After Growth'.

variants.⁶² Using Lorenzo Fioramonti's typology, we could say that most of these variants would combine the steady-state and well-being economies, though a few may evolve in more radical degrowth directions.⁶³

Of course, this scenario is unlikely to materialise, and it leaves many questions unanswered. But it can help us envision how something like a post-growth world order might emerge from ongoing tendencies, crises, and counter-hegemonic struggles across the world-system.

Conclusion

In sum, by highlighting the reciprocal confluence of capitalist economics, geopolitical competition, and growth-based ideologies, a complex hegemony lens can illuminate the multidimensional bases of growth hegemony as well as the messiness of post-growth futures in ways that are missed by structural Marxist approaches. The post-growth transition scenario sketched above may seem exceedingly implausible to some. But the evidence that contradicts the plausibility of 'green growth' compels us to explore post-growth alternatives and think carefully about how they might emerge at national and global scales. Critical IR scholars can contribute to such efforts by analysing the political-economic, ideological, and military-strategic obstacles to post-growth transitions in different national, regional, and global contexts and consider counter-hegemonic strategies and mechanisms through which these obstacles might be overcome.

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000159>.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Matthias Kranke and Jacob Hasselbalch for their excellent editorial support during the process of compiling this special issue. I would also like to thank Robynn Eckersley, Lucy Ford, Chukwumerije Okereke, and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable commentary on earlier versions of the manuscript.

Michael J. Albert is a lecturer in Global Environmental Politics at the University of Edinburgh. His research explores the global politics of climate, energy, and food system transformations. His first book (due to be released by MIT Press in April 2024) is titled *Navigating the Polycrisis: Mapping the Futures of Capitalism and the Earth*. It argues that social scientists need to devote more systematic attention to possible futures in an age of intersecting and often mutually amplifying crises – encompassing crises of climate, capitalism, energy, food, geopolitics, and far-right populism. His articles have also appeared in *Global Environmental Politics*, *Review of International Political Economy*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *Global Policy*, *Globalizations*, and *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*.

⁶² Hubert Buch-Hansen, 'Capitalist diversity and de-growth trajectories', *Ecological Economics*, 106 (2014), pp. 167–73.

⁶³ Lorenzo Fioramonti, 'Post-growth theories in a global world: a comparative analysis'.