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Degrowth, global asymmetries, and ecosocial justice: Decolonial perspectives from Latin America

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Abstract

Degrowth literature predominantly states that degrowth strategies are meant from and for the Global North. While economic mainstream discourse suggests that the Global South still has to grow in terms of achieving development, degrowth proponents expect a reduction of material and energy throughput in the Global North to make ecological and conceptual space for the Global South to find its own paths toward ecosocial transformation. Based on a Latin American post-development and post-extractivist perspective and drawing on dependency theory, this article suggests another approach: first, it argues that the growth imperative, which in the peripheral world translates into the imperative to develop, also causes harm in societies of the Global South. Throughout Latin America, in the last decades, economic growth has mainly been achieved through extractivism with negative impacts, which are now being pushed further by green growth strategies. Second, I explore some possibilities for a cross-fertilisation between degrowth and International Relations scholarship, calling into question the assumption that degrowth in high-income countries would automatically 'make space' for the Global South to engage in self-determined paths of ecosocial transformation, as long as the structures, institutions, and rules of global governance and trade which secure profoundly asymmetric, colonial relations are not challenged.

Keywords: coloniality; degrowth; extractivism; globalisation; Global South; green growth; interdependencies; Latin America

Introduction

In early September 2022, the recently appointed Colombian minister for mining and energy Irene Vélez affirmed that it was necessary to ask developed countries to economically degrow, in order to mitigate the impacts of climate change on society.[1] Although this statement brought the minister a wave of criticism from business and political leaders, it was a path-breaker for a necessary debate in Latin America.

Today, the concept of degrowth points to a broad discursive and practical field which explores strategies of ecosocial transformation as an answer to a crisis that is not just ecological, but multidimensional. It challenges the dominant assumption in both mainstream economics and mainstream International Relations (IR) that perpetual economic growth must continue, and that to address ecological breakdown, we only have to decouple GDP growth from its ecological impacts. Thus, degrowth also opposes the concepts that seek to 'harmonise' economic growth with environmental sustainability, such as sustainable development, green growth, or green economy, maintaining

[1]'Minminas Irene Vélez dice que hay que exigirles a países que decrezcan', *El Tiempo* (2 September 2022), available at: {https://www.eltiempo.com/economia/sectores/ministra-de-minas-irene-velez-sobre-decrecimiento-economico-699216}.

that decoupling is neither founded nor realistic.[2] As pointed out by Kranke and Hasselbach in the introduction to this special issue, degrowth can contribute to debates in IR in so far it questions the structural, institutional, political, and cultural effects that the fixation on economic growth has had on global governance and on modern capitalist societies as a whole, in the context of ecological breakdown.[3]

Expanding the description of degrowth provided by Fioramonti in this special issue, it is important to stress that degrowth does not propose to abandon the idea of growth in all sectors of the economy, but to deprioritise economic growth as a primary goal of state action.[4] Degrowth is understood as *the opposite* of recession, as it proposes a planned, coherent policy to reduce ecological impact, reduce inequality, and improve well-being.[5] It aims at scrutinising the productive or reproductive activities present in each context, to discern which of them should grow to strengthen sustainability and social well-being, and which should shrink or even disappear, to achieve modes of living compatible with ecological limits and horizons of equity and justice.

Degrowth mainly presents itself as a perspective from and for countries of the geopolitical North, especially Europe and North America.[6] Regarding relations with the Global South, many degrowth proponents clarify that a degrowth agenda is no universal recipe for transformation, rejecting the very idea of one universal transformational path valid for all world regions. Rather, they state that degrowth in Northern high-income countries is necessary to 'increase the ecological space' or 'liberate conceptual space'[7] for countries or economies situated on the peripheries of the capitalist world system, to allow them 'to find their own trajectories to what they define as the good life'.[8] A complementary argument, also adopted by Okereke in this special issue, goes that the poorer countries of the Global South need to grow in order to satisfy people's basic needs.[9] It evolves around specific mainstream understandings of poverty, needs, and well-being, associated with material abundance versus scarcity which, as I will show, seem questionable in the light of recent Latin American debates.

This article attempts to sketch out some strengths and weaknesses of degrowth in light of the task of bringing about globally just, ecosocial transformation and explores possibilities of cross-fertilisation with some debates within IR in this context. To do so, it draws on the Latin American tradition of dependency theory, on a decade of debates in the Working Group on Alternatives to Development,[10] and on recent research on the geopolitics of green

[2]Jason Hickel, 'What does degrowth mean? A few points of clarification', *Globalizations*, 18:7 (2021), pp. 1105–11; Jason Hickel and Giorgos Kallis, 'Is green growth possible?', *New Political Economy*, 25:4 (2020), pp. 469–86. See also Hasselbach and Kranke in the introduction to this special issue.

[3]Barbara Muraca and Matthias Schmelzer, 'Sustainable degrowth: Historical roots of the search for alternatives to growth in three regions', in Iris Borowy and Matthias Schmelzer (eds), *History of the Future of Economic Growth: Historical Roots of Current Debates on Sustainable Degrowth* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 174–97.

[4]Max Koch, 'The state in the transformation to a sustainable postgrowth economy', *Environmental Politics*, 29:1 (2020), pp. 115–33.

[5]Well-being is a disputed concept which cannot be dissociated from its systemic embedding: while mainstream economics in modern/colonial capitalism centre it on money and consumption, pluriversal perspectives from the Global South both challenge this limited understanding of the materiality necessary to reproduce life and stress the social, relational, and spiritual dimensions of well-being. I will use the term in this more complex understanding.

[6]Muraca and Schmelzer, 'Sustainable degrowth: Historical roots'; Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D'Alisa, and Federico Demaria, *The Case for Degrowth* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

[7]Muraca and Schmelzer, 'Sustainable degrowth: Historical roots', p. 176.

[8]Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (eds), *Degrowth: Vocabulary for a New Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 34.

[9]Beatriz Rodríguez-Labajos, Ivonne Yánez, Patrick Bond, et al., 'Not so natural an alliance? Degrowth and environmental justice movements in the Global South', *Ecological Economics*, 157 (2019), pp. 174–85.

[10]The working group includes Latin American activists, engaged scholars, and Indigenous representatives since 2010. See Miriam Lang, and Dunia Mokrani (eds), *Beyond Development: Alternative Visions from Latin America* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2013). See 'Grupo Permanente de Trabajo sobre Alternativas a Desarrollo', available at: {https://www.rosalux.org.ec/grupo/}.

colonialism.[11] As a scholar activist of German nationality based in Latin America since 2003, my methodological approach would be best described as participatory action research, a collaborative, problem-oriented approach to knowledge production that focuses on achieving positive social change.[12]

The text is organised around three main arguments: first, I will critically discuss the assumption that the Global South needs to grow while the North needs to degrow from different angles, including that of dependency. Second, I will summarise existing dialogues, resonances, and (non-)engagements between degrowth – as a movement and as a research agenda – and the Global South. And third, I will highlight the limitations of the claim that degrowth in the North will 'open space for the South', pointing out where some debates in IR could be beneficial to degrowth and vice versa and establishing the need for decolonial North–South alliances against (green) growth.

Growth as such is not the solution, including for the Global South

The statement that poor countries in the South still need to grow to meet their basic needs expresses an assumed truth generated by the development/underdevelopment narrative in recent decades, in both the geopolitical North and South. Arturo Escobar was one of the first to suggest that it might actually make sense to apply the idea of post-growth directly to Southern contexts. In a text exploring the possible connections between post-growth and post-development, he warns that:

> it is important to resist falling into the trap, from northern perspectives, of thinking that while the North needs to degrow, the South needs 'development'; … that degrowth is 'ok for the North' but that the South needs rapid growth, whether to catch up with rich countries, satisfy the needs of the poor, or reduce inequalities.[13]

The affirmation that economic growth allows impoverished people to satisfy their basic needs is misleading. In the following, I will discuss three arguments that contradict it. First, that there is no simple correlation between GDP growth and poverty reduction. Second, that most economic growth in the Global South is achieved through economic activities which have a negative impact on well-being for many people. And third, that in a context of exacerbated inequalities, putting a cap on over-consumption is also necessary in the wealthiest strata of Global South societies.

No simple correlation between economic growth and poverty reduction

Mainstream economics suggest that economic growth is a powerful force for reducing poverty. High and sustained economic growth would increase labour demand and wages, which in return would reduce poverty. But in practice, things are much more complex. Tabassum and Majeed, for example, point out that 'the extent of poverty reduction as a result of economic growth depends on how the distribution of income changes with economic growth and on initial inequalities in income. If income inequality increases, then economic growth does not lead to a significant poverty reduction.'[14]

GDP growth, even GDP growth per capita as an average figure, should not be confused with the idea of every inhabitant of a country actually having more material resources at their disposal. Especially not in the Global South. The Ecuadorian experience, for example, rather points to the opposite: during the recent phase of economic growth under the government of

[11] Miriam Lang, Mary Ann Manahan, and Breno Bringel (eds), *The Geopolitics of Green Colonialism: Global Justice and Ecosocial Transitions* (London: Pluto Press, 2024).

[12] Mary Brydon-Miller, Michael Kral, and Alfredo Ortiz Aragón, 'Participatory action research: International perspectives and practices', *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 13:2 (2020), pp. 103–11.

[13] Arturo Escobar, 'Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: A preliminary conversation', *Sustainability Science,* 10 (2015), pp. 451–62.

[14] Amina Tabassum and Tariq M. Majeed, 'Economic growth and income inequality relationship: Role of credit market imperfection', *The Pakistan Development Review*, 47:4, Part II (2008), pp. 727–43.

Rafael Correa (2007–17), although there was a temporary reduction of poverty rates, it was the wealthiest economic groups who most benefited from this growth. The political economy of extractivism and increasing dependency – mainly on China – fuelled a process of capital concentration and centralisation, despite a progressive government rhetoric that suggested promoting the redistribution of wealth and income.[15] Even in China, often celebrated as model of poverty reduction through growth, the shrinking poverty figures based on monetary income contrast with the loss of subsistence economies and often the associated land, and also of corresponding forms of knowledge and cultural references of belonging, which are central to a broader understanding of well-being.[16] From a Latin American perspective, too, China is seen more as a new world power externalising the social and ecological costs of its growth to Africa and Latin America than as a country of the Global South.[17] Growth certainly serves the well-being of capitalist markets, but whether it serves the well-being of people and Nature is a much more complex assessment to make.

I sustain that to meet the basic needs of the most disadvantaged populations in the Global North *and* South, policies aimed at decreasing inequality *both within and between* countries, as proposed by degrowth scholarship, seem much more promising than pursuing abstract GDP growth, brown or green.[18] The Latin American working group and degrowth proponents converge in that there is no simple correlation between economic growth and poverty reduction. To put an end to poverty, the priority should be redistribution and not abstract growth. Not only redistribution in terms of monetary wealth, but also in terms of land, access to freshwater, energy, seeds, etc. As long as we only look at GDP growth as an abstract number through the macroeconomic lens, without qualitatively assessing which activities or goods generate that growth with what effects in different social groups, ecoregions, or sectors of the economy, we will know little about how well-being and needs satisfaction have evolved. They might have improved for some and gotten worse for many others. Let's have a closer look at this based on the recent Latin American experience.

The negative impacts of growth on well-being in the Global South

Latin American dependency theory early unmasked the development promise as a fraud.[19] It evidenced that an unjust international division of labour, nature, and technology, rooted in the colonial and imperial past, had led to relations of unequal exchange.[20] Recent research from ecological economics shows that the general pattern of appropriation that characterised the colonial period has continued and indeed expanded into present times, upholding relations of coloniality regardless of the structural changes in the world economy. Price differentials in international trade operate as an 'effective method of maintaining the patterns of appropriation that once overtly defined the colonial economy, allowing blame for "underdevelopment" to be shifted onto the victims'.[21]

[15]Luis Fierro Carrión, 'Fortalecimiento de los grupos económicos en el Ecuador en la última década', *Revista Economía*, 71:114 (2019), pp. 35–71.

[16]Daniel Fuchs, 'Die Transformation der Produktions- und Klassenverhältnisse in China seit 1978: Überlegungen zur Herausbildung und den Widersprüchen des chinesischen Kapitalismus', in Marlies Linke, Thomas Sablowski, and Klaus Steinitz (eds), *China: Gesellschaftliche Entwicklung und globale Auswirkungen* (Berlin: Dietz, 2015), pp. 29–45.

[17]Ariel Slipak, 'An analysis of China's rise and its links to Latin America following the Theory of Dependency', *Realidad Económica*, 282 (2014), pp. 99–123.

[18]This is one of my major disagreements with Okereke in this special issue.

[19]Raul Prebisch, *The Economic Development of Latin America and Its Principal Problems* (Santiago de Chile: CEPAL, 1950). Available at: {https://repositorio.cepal.org/handle/11362/29973}; André Gunder Frank, *Capitalismo y desarrollo en América Latina* (La Habana: Ed. de Ciencias Sociales, 1970); Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1979). For debates on the renewed validity of dependency theory, see *Latin American Perspectives*, 49:1 (2022).

[20]Arghiri Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); Samir Amin, *Imperialism and Unequal Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977).

[21]Jason Hickel, Christian Dorninger, Hanspeter Wieland, and Intan Suwandi, 'Imperialist appropriation in the world economy: Drain from the Global South through unequal exchange, 1990–2015', *Global Environmental Change*, 73 (2022), p. 102467.

I argue with dependency theory that the effects of (brown or green) growth are strongly influenced by the positionality of a society in the modern/colonial world system. The latest strong phase of regional Latin American GDP growth between 2000 and 2006 (with an average growth of 3.2%), and from 2007 to 2013 (with an average growth of 3.5%)[22] coincided with an intensification of extractivist activities which has been labelled as 'commodity consensus'. Maristella Svampa reminds us that this commodity boom reinforced the idea 'that due to the convergence of the abundance of resources or natural riches and opportunities offered by the international markets, it would be possible to achieve development, like that in core countries'.[23]

At the beginning of the century, the commodity boom did bring material improvements to (almost) all social groups in Latin America, including the poor, mainly through conditioned cash transfers. But this was only a transient gain, with poverty rates shooting up again since the decline in international commodity prices in 2014.[24] Meanwhile, global inequalities had deepened and ecologically unequal exchange had intensified, as ecological economists remind us. Latin America, the world region with the highest net exports of materials per capita globally, has played a decisive role in the second phase of the so-called great acceleration. But especially since the 1970s, its material decapitalisation through extractivism has increased fourfold – without necessarily generating positive economic returns due to the price structures in the global economy.[25] Neither did this intensification of extractivism shake the historically handed-down structures of extreme social inequalities *within* countries. On the contrary, it contributed to a steep further concentration of wealth:

> Between 2002 and 2015 – largely coinciding with the primary goods boom and the political turn to the left in the region – the assets of the nearly 15,000 Latin American multimillionaires grew by an average of 21% per year, outstripping the average economic growth of 3.5% several times over.[26]

The logic of capitalist accumulation fuelled by incessant growth is a cause for increasing inequality. This is an important argument in favour of degrowth. Svampa also reminds us that instead of achieving development, enhanced extractivism in fact generated poverty, through dynamics such as dispossession, land grabbing, the destruction of territories, and the displacement of populations.[27]

The literature on the paradox of abundance has eloquently shown the pitfalls of rentist economies which rely on extractivism – inequality and poverty, a concentration of the benefits in a small elite, the weakening of democracy and institutions, instability through the dependence on international commodity prices, corruption and clientelism, the destruction of nature – affecting Indigenous and peasant modes of living and worldviews and enhancing patriarchal relations. The fatal consequence of all this has been called 'impoverishing growth'.[28]

In most regions of the Global South, the growth induced by global markets and mega-infrastructures has generated only few good formal jobs while pushing hundreds of millions

[22] CEPAL, 'América Latina y el Caribe: tasas de crecimiento anual del PIB y promedios por septenios (1951–2020)'. Available at: {https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/pr/files/grafico_trayectoria_crecimiento.pdf}.

[23] Maristella Svampa, *Neo-extractivism in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 7.

[24] ECLAC, *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Santiago de Chile: ECLAC, 2022).

[25] Juan Infante-Amate, Alexander Urrego Mesa, and Enric Tello Aragay, 'Las venas abiertas de América Latina en la era del antropoceno: Un estudio biofísico del comercio exterior (1900–2016)', *Diálogos Revista Electrónica de Historia*, 21:2 (2020), pp. 177–214 (p. 202).

[26] Stefan Peters, *Rentengesellschaften* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019), p. 206 (my translation).

[27] Svampa, *Neo-extractivism in Latin America*, p. 8.

[28] Alberto Acosta, 'La maldición de la abundancia: Un riesgo para la democracia', *La Tendencia, revista de análisis político*, 9 (2009), pp. 103–15.

of people into informal sectors.[29] Capital-intensive but not labour-intensive, most big 'development projects' require few highly qualified workers, generally not recruited from where they are implemented.

To suggest that poverty could be addressed by random (brown or green) economic growth in countries of the Global South means to ignore the profoundly colonial and asymmetric nature of the capitalist global political economy, in past and present.[30] It also means to ignore the planetary boundaries which are highlighted by degrowth. These also point at the need to transcend the narrow focus of dependency theory on the structural impossibility for the Global South to 'develop', and to call into question the expansionist dominant paradigm which has brought about ecological breakdown, by emphasising the need for ecological balance.

In the Global South, too, there are sectors which need to degrow

Latin America also has its share of millionaires and super-rich, which are part of the 10 per cent of the world population that according to Oxfam (2015) are responsible for 50 per cent of carbon emissions. Proponents of steady-state economies, degrowth, and well-being economies, as well as authors from the Global South, have pointed out that achieving a safe and just space for the future of humanity requires not only addressing basic needs or minimum incomes, but also introducing sufficiency policies by limiting riches, setting maximum incomes, 'greed lines', and ethically acceptable consumption corridors.[31] These are steps which require strong regulatory intervention and a restructuring of the dominant understandings of rights, which place private property rights and corporate rights to profit at the forefront.

The discursive counterposition of a 'developed' to an 'underdeveloped' (and later 'developing') world, introduced after the Second World War, has installed a common understanding of dichotomous and simplifying views of the Global North and South. This stereotype of the 'rich North' and the 'poor South' is served when it is said that 'the South' has to grow. It levels out the deep inequalities that characterise the societies of our times, as well as the historical-structural heterogeneities and complexities that differentiate them from each other. Latin America is known as one of the most unequal regions of the world, while 'inequality increases status competition and undermines wellbeing in society'.[32] Driven by the hegemonic imaginaries of success, the middle classes in countries of the Global South tend to replicate, sometimes in caricaturesque ways, the highly unsustainable 'imperial mode of living'[33] – a mode of living which systematically externalises its social and ecological costs towards other world regions or other, often racialised, social groups, and thus *is not generalisable*, contrary to what the development promise suggests.[34]

The challenge that scholars, social movements, and institutions in the Global South and North face in the context of both global injustice and ecological crisis is a profound, global, cultural change. This challenge includes opening up to transdisciplinarity as well as to dialogues with non-academic knowledges. It also includes the need to collectively redefine new imaginaries of a dignified, satisfactory, and sustainable life and shape new subjectivities guided by the notion of sufficiency and balance, in line with a pluriversal understanding of well-being.

[29] Aseem Shrivastava and Ashish Kothari, *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2012), cited in: Alberto Acosta and Ulrich Brand, *Salidas del laberinto capitalista: Decrecimiento y postextractivismo* (Quito: Fundación Rosa Luxemburg, 2017).

[30] This is where I also disagree with Okereke in this special issue.

[31] Carlos Larrea and Natalia Greene, 'De la lucha contra la pobreza a la superación de la codicia', in Miriam Lang, Belén Cevallos, and Claudia López (eds), *La osadía de lo nuevo: Alternativas de política económica* (Quito: Fundación Rosa Luxemburg and Abya-Yala, 2015), pp. 11–60; Ian Gough, 'Defining floors and ceilings: The contribution of human needs theory', *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 16:1 (2020), pp. 208–19.

[32] Gough, 'Defining floors and ceilings', p. 214.

[33] Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living* (London: Verso, 2021).

[34] Stephan Lessenich, *Living Well at Others' Expense: The Hidden Costs of Western Prosperity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

Worldviews from Indigenous, Afro-descendant, or peasant communities, usually labelled as primitive or underdeveloped, have a lot to teach about how to find satisfaction in truly sustainable modes of living.[35] Their understanding of a life in plenitude often diverges from the common Western definitions of universal human needs, establishing the necessity of an intercultural and interepistemic dialogue.[36]

Translated to an IR context, this challenge also includes a research agenda on how to rethink global institutions, revert their asymmetric internal structures and align their purposes on the predicaments human societies face today. In the next section, I sketch out certain resonances between degrowth and alternative paradigms from the South, as well as some aspects where degrowth and certain debates within IR could eventually cross-fertilise each other.

Opportunities and challenges of a dialogue between degrowth and IR in the face of global asymmetries and ecological breakdown

As degrowth proponents have pointed out, the concept of degrowth might not be very mobilising in the Global South, where the paradigm of 'underdevelopment' still has strong effects on people's subjectivities.[37] But there is also no need for degrowth to become a guiding concept for transformation in the South. Latin American authors have evidenced certain convergences and synergies between degrowth and post-extractivism, post-development, and Indigenous worldviews such as *sumak kawsay* that should be further explored in the perspective of necessary North–South alliances.[38]

Synergies between degrowth and alternative paradigms from the South

Both *sumak kawsay* and degrowth reject the modern idea of unlimited progress and expansion and focus on qualitative rather than quantitative factors regarding what is considered a good life. Both also reject the notion of unlimited needs fuelled by modern capitalism and advocate for limits: degrowth sees 'limits not as something externally imposed upon us, but as a conscious choice of self-limitation',[39] in a collective, deliberative exercise of radical democracy; *sumak kawsay* is dysfunctional to capitalist accumulation as it seeks to rebalance emerging inequalities and considers them a threat to community life. It also fosters collaboration and reciprocity instead of competitiveness. Both embrace the idea that autonomy, collective self-government, and freedom imply giving oneself rules of conduct and therefore limits, instead of following arbitrarily or externally imposed ones – an idea that constitutes the very foundation of democracy as self-rule.[40]

However, while the rich conceptual dialogue between degrowth and alternative visions from Latin America must be acknowledged, from a perspective of International Relations it is problematic that degrowth proponents formulate their policy proposals mainly just 'from and for the Global North', without analytically engaging with the deep entanglements and interdependencies in our modern-colonial globalised world.

[35]Miriam Lang, 'Buen Vivir as a territorial practice: Building a more just and sustainable life through interculturality', *Sustainability Science*, 17 (2022), pp. 1287–99.

[36]Miriam Lang, 'Poverty reduction and redistribution in the light of civilizational crisis: Lessons from South America's progressive phase', *Socialism and Democracy*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 28–48; Lang, 'Buen Vivir as a territorial practice'.

[37]Rodríguez-Labajos, Yánez, Bond, et al., 'Not so natural an alliance?'.

[38]Escobar, 'Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions'; Eduardo Gudynas, 'Buen Vivir', in Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (eds), *Degrowth: Vocabulary for a New Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 234–7; Acosta and Brand, *Salidas del laberinto capitalista*.

[39]Giorgos Kallis, 'Socialism without growth', *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 30:2 (2019), pp. 189–206.

[40]Ulrich Brand, Barbara Muraca, Éric Pineault et al., 'From planetary to societal boundaries: An argument for collectively defined self-limitation', *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy*, 17:1 (2021), pp. 264–91.

Degrowth in the North is not enough: Global interdependencies and structural obstacles to a democratic ecosocial transformation in the Global South

As was initially mentioned, a recurrent thesis in degrowth literature is that degrowth in high-income countries of the Global North will 'liberate conceptual space' or 'ecological space' for the Global South. Some authors even claim that degrowth is a decolonial strategy:

> Degrowth in the North creates space for Southern economies to shift away from their enforced role as exporters of cheap labour and raw materials, and to focus instead on … building economies focused on sovereignty, self-sufficiency, and human wellbeing.[41]

I strongly agree with Jason Hickel that Southern countries should be free to organise their resources and labour around meeting self-defined needs rather than around servicing Northern growth.[42] However, this only will occur if the structures, institutions, and rules of the globalised capitalist world system are transformed and actual room for manoeuvre is created for the countries of the South. And this requires both regional and global alliances.

Again, let's look back on the recent Latin American experience. Even when a series of – more or less – left-oriented governments (2000–15) claimed to leave neoliberalism behind and to overcome extractivism, configuring an exceptional geopolitical constellation in the region, the respective countries could not achieve a self-determined, endogenous process of sustainable regional integration. Rather, they competed against each other in the export of raw materials, servicing the growth of China and other big economies. It would be shortsighted to exempt the Latin American governments from all liability in this context and to ignore intra-regional power imbalances.[43]

But these governments were also trapped in a tight web of global trade and intellectual property rules, finance and debt dynamics, country risk rankings, dispute settlements, etc. that significantly narrowed their possibilities – a web of rules that, from a perspective of global justice, operates in an asymmetric way.[44] Once again unequal exchange and power imbalances in the global political economy operate when the prices that Latin American countries get for exporting primary goods are significantly lower than what they pay for the processed goods they import.[45] Today, imperial appropriation not only includes cheap unprocessed raw materials, but also cheap labour and processed goods from certain regions of the South that became the world's factories in the 1980s: global commodity chains, where Northern firms deploy monopoly power to depress Southern suppliers' prices, while setting final prices as high as possible, still allow the Global North to appropriate this industrial labour cheaply.[46]

Consequently, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition to reduce the material and energy throughput in the Global North for the South to thrive. Actual 'spacemaking' for endogenous and sovereign reforms in the South will not happen through a simple reduction in the demand of raw materials if the asymmetric global economic structures remain untouched. That might even lead

[41] Hickel, 'What does degrowth mean?', p. 1109.

[42] Jason Hickel, 'The anti-colonial politics of degrowth', *Political Geography*, 88 (2021), available at: {DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102404}.

[43] Edgardo Lander, *Crisis civilizatoria: Experiencias de los gobiernos progresistas y debates en la izquierda latinoamericana* (Guadalajara: CALAS, 2019); Massimo Modonesi, 'El progresismo latinoamericano: Un debate de época', in Franck Gaudichaud, Massimo Modonesi, and Jeffery R. Webber (eds), *Los progresismos latinoamericanos del siglo XXI* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2019), pp. 181–230.

[44] E.g. the United States, taking advantage of their power position, have failed to recognise or comply with a series of multilateral norms that do not correspond to their interests. Regarding human rights treaties, see Marie Wilken, 'U.S. aversion to international human rights treaties', Global Justice Center Blog (22 June 2017), available at: {https://globaljusticecenter.net/blog/773-u-s-aversion-to-international-human-rights-treaties}. Regarding International Labour Standards from the ILO not ratified by the US, see the Information System on International Labour Standards, available at: {https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/es/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11210:0::NO::P11210_COUNTRY_ID:102871}. The United States has also failed to ratify the Convention on Biodiversity and joined the Paris Climate Agreement late.

[45] Infante-Amate, Urrego Mesa, and Tello Aragay, 'Las venas abiertas de América Latina'.

[46] Hickel, Dorninger, Wieland, and Suwandi, 'Imperialist appropriation in the world economy', p. 2.

to a catastrophic recession in some Southern countries, which is what degrowthers vow to avoid. As Trettel Silva underlines in a recent degrowth publication,

> it is impossible to address the global and colonial nature of capitalism and the social-ecological crisis only accounting for processes in the Global North, expecting for the South to harvest the benefits of freed ecological and conceptual space. Embracing an internationalist perspective means creating a framework for a social-ecological project that accounts fully for each country's engagement with globalization.[47]

This is where certain debates within IR, for example those focusing on what a new international economic order or global green politics could look like today,[48] could contribute to overcoming certain shortcomings of degrowth scholarship. Some Latin American scholars also have outlined their visions of a new global economic order,[49] and of course, the voices from the Global South should be prominent here.

The need for decolonial global alliances against green growth

Instead of opening pathways for sustainable and globally just ecosocial transitions, the hegemonic answers to climate change centred on green growth are leading to a considerable intensification of extractivist pressure on regions of the Global South. Their priorities are to ensure (a) a sufficient supply of 'strategic minerals' for a new industrial revolution towards renewables; (b) 'energy security'; and (c) good decarbonisation records for the Global North.

Instead of a real energy *transition*, this rather translates into an overall *energy expansion*[50] – a new driver for economic growth. The geopolitics of the Ukraine war have exacerbated this expansion further, including fossil fuels. Research from Latin America and Africa shows how this tech-based and corporate-led process to advance green growth translates into manifold new environmental injustices and forms of green colonialism[51] – contradicting Okereke's expectations in this special issue: 'green' land grabs for huge wind farms, solar parks, or hydrogen infrastructures, water shortages because of large-scale mining for strategic minerals, and a renewed subordinated insertion of many Southern countries into the world economy. Mega-diverse ecosystems, livelihoods, and worldviews in the Global South are sacrificed in the name of decarbonisation. Also here, inequalities between and within countries are deepening, and the externalisation of social and ecological costs to many Southern territories is being exacerbated.

Hegemonic green growth policies assign four sets of roles to regions such as Latin America, each of which contains a strong dimension of imperial appropriation: (1) an important reserve of raw materials, assumed to be available for the major world powers' decarbonisation; (2) a potential place where the CO_2 emissions that will continue to take place in the North (including China) can be 'neutralised' through carbon offset projects, to reach the goal of 'zero net emissions' – not to be confused with zero real emissions, in Europe, the United States, or China; (3) a recipient of waste exports from the North, including electronic and toxic waste from renewable technologies and

[47] Gabriel Trettel Silva, 'An overview of strategies for social-ecological transformation in the field of trade and decolonialisation', in Nathan Barlow, Livia Regen, Noémie Cadiou et al. (eds), *Degrowth & Strategy: How to Bring about Social-Ecological Transformation* (London: Mayfly Books, 2022), pp. 375–82 (p. 381).

[48] See Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Alex Veit and Daniel Fuchs, *Eine Gerechte Weltwirtschaftsordnung? Die 'New International Economic Order' und die Zukunft der Süd-Nord-Beziehungen* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2023); Peter Newell, *Global Green Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[49] Alberto Acosta and John Cajas Guijarro, 'Del coronavirus a la gran transformación. Repensando la institucionalidad económica global', *Ecuador Today* (2020), available at: {https://ecuadortoday.media/2020/06/25/del-coronavirus-a-la-gran-transformacion-repensando-la-institucionalidad-economica-global/}.

[50] Daniel Chavez, Sean Sweeney and John Treat, 'Energy Transition or Energy Expansion?' (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute and Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, 2021), available at: {https://tinyurl.com/mr43sss5}.

[51] Lang, Manahan, and Bringel (eds), *The Geopolitics of Green Colonialism*.

digitalisation; and finally, (4) a potential market for the new technologies that the eco-modernised Northern economies will produce and sell at high prices.

One of the main contributions of degrowth to debates about global environmental governance and a just ecosocial transition is to openly problematise green growth,[52] which makes degrowth a potential ally for actors from the peripheries. But this will only be the case if, at the same time, degrowth scholars and movements actively engage in strategies to dismantle the structural hierarchies of the global political economy.[53]

Conclusions

On the basis of Latin American debates, this article explores the potential contributions of degrowth perspectives to a globally just ecosocial transition. It suggests that decentring economic growth from being the primary goal of state action is equally beneficial for the Global North and for the Global South on the path towards sustainable and dignified modes of living. The argument is *not* that the Global South should generically degrow, in the sense of shrinking all activities. It is the Global North, considering its historical responsibilities and colonial as well as environmental debt, that must contribute the major part in the absolute reduction of material and energy throughput in the face of ecological breakdown. But decentring economic growth, and prioritising life within planetary boundaries instead, can bring about a selective degrowth of harmful productive and reproductive activities, in both the Global North and South. In the Global South, this would mean, for example, reducing extractivism, which has not only impoverished many social groups in the name of growth but also constitutes a major structural obstacle on the path toward self-determined economic policies.

This article thus challenges the economic mainstream discourse which suggests that economic growth, especially if understood as low-carbon or green, would lead the peoples of the Global South towards a dignified future. It also challenges the inherent growth orientation of global governance institutions. It argues that neither does growth automatically lead to poverty reduction nor is the decoupling of economic growth from resource use realistic, once a perspective of global justice is taken. Moreover, it highlights how hegemonic decarbonisation and green growth strategies are implemented at the expense of many territories and peoples in the Global South who must bear their environmental and social costs, thus reinforcing the coloniality of the global political economy.

As degrowth scholars propose to put an end to poverty (not only) in the Global South, the priority should not be pursuing abstract GDP growth, but measures of redistribution and restitution in the face of multiple inequalities, regarding wealth, income, and land, and also a more equal distribution of advantages and disadvantages due to factors such as race, gender, or the peripheral location of a society in the current world system. This entails, for example, implementing caps on income and wealth.

But it also requires other strategies much less discussed within degrowth scholarship, to dismantle the deep asymmetries inherent to the existing global structures and institutions regarding finance, trade, investment, and, for example, environmental governance. Those structures secure relations of unequal exchange between Global North and South which give continuity to colonial relations of appropriation. Because of these structural asymmetries, I argue that degrowth in the North, to 'make ecological and conceptual space' for the South to build its own futures, as many degrowth authors frame the task at hand, is not enough. A sudden reduction of demand in raw materials might even lead to catastrophic recession in the South if structural global interdependencies and asymmetries are not addressed. If the degrowth movement wants to engage with the Global South in a decolonial way, it must build North–South alliances around an ecosocial project

[52] Hickel and Kallis, 'Is green growth possible?'.

[53] Prapimphan Chiengkul, 'The degrowth movement: Alternative economic practices and relevance to developing countries', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 43:2 (2018), pp. 81–95.

that tackles the unjust global governance structures and envisions global justice in both symbolic and very material terms. Here, certain IR debates on a new international economic and financial order could be beneficial.

On the other hand, being one of the few voices in the Global North that questions the logic of green growth and advocates for structural changes, degrowth is predestined to be part of both research and political alliances to such ends – but only if it opens up to a real dialogue with movements in the Global South that goes beyond conceptual convergences and engages in strategies for a structural change of the existing asymmetric international relations.

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