



DEGROWTH WITHIN A FEMINIST ECONOMIC DISCOURSE: CHALLENGING THE 'WHITE-SUPREMACIST CAPITALIST PATRIARCHAL' SOCIAL ORDER?

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“(T)he subordination, appropriation and exploitation of women and the natural world are interconnected and ... extend to the treatment of ethnic and racial minorities in the Global North, most of the Global South, the poor, the aged, the differently abled, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans communities.” (Phillips and Rumens 2015 referring to Warren 1997)

On the current trajectory, global societies are headed towards surpassing the 1.5-2°C limit to global warming agreed in the Paris agreement at least within this century, and possibly within a much shorter timespan (New et al. 2011; Armstrong McKay et al. 2022; IPCC 2022). This is tantamount to the globally affluent bearing the responsibility for causing the deaths of 1 billion global poor due to human-induced climate change, analogous to involuntary or negligent manslaughter (Pearce and Parncutt 2023), with women and children experiencing the brunt of environmental crises (Christensen et al. 2023). Degrowth, as a research field and movement, is an approach and a solution to eco-social transformation. The concept of degrowth focuses on achieving a socially sustainable and equitable reduction in society's resource consumption while ensuring well-being. It is seen as humanity's best chance to avoid the predicted 1.7°C of warming by 2030, as outlined in the latest IPCC report (IPCC 2022; Hickel et al. 2022). Degrowth scenarios are considered more feasible and sustainable compared to technology-driven approaches that rely on high energy-GDP decoupling, carbon dioxide removal, and rapid renewable energy transformation (Keyßer and Lenzen 2021; Vogel and Hickel 2023). While acknowledging the importance of a feminist viewpoint, the degrowth research has not consistently integrated feminist principles into its theoretical framework (Dengler 2021). The effort to merge feminist economics with degrowth is an ongoing endeavor that holds the potential to benefit both areas of study and promote more sustainable and gender-equitable livelihoods (Barca et al. 2023; Dengler and Seebacher 2019; Dengler and Strunk 2018). Any successful social-ecological transformation will require the dismantling of the “Imperialist White Supremacist Heteropatriarchy” (hooks 2004), in other words the liberal white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal social order which underpins productivist capitalism and the exploitation of nature, women, racialised “others”, and labour for profit (Neocleous 2000).

“While it is most straightforwardly understood as material downscaling, degrowth denotes a far more encompassing transformation: a break with the ideology of growth, the repoliticization of the economy, and a reorientation of economic relations along different principles.” (Akbulut 2021)

Degrowth, both an academic and activist framework, seeks alternatives to current economic and socio-ecological systems. It advocates a shift away from detrimental practices such as advertising, fossil fuels, and planned obsolescence, towards sustainable and equitable economies, shorter workweeks, and public services and provisioning for basic needs (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015; Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta 2014; Kallis 2011). The overarching goal of degrowth is to address ecological degradation, social injustice, and climate change through just and democratic transformations, limiting the economic expansion of the Global North, and allowing people in the Global South to meet their material needs for well-being within ecological limits - degrowth seeks to also rectify the deeply gendered global injustice where the ecological crisis disproportionately affects those who have contributed the least to it. In doing so, it creates conceptual and material space for countries in the Global South to pursue their own paths towards well-being (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015; Dengler 2021). Degrowth offers a feasible and physically attainable vision for the future, encompassing three key dimensions: 1) Reducing environmental pressures; 2) Breaking free from the growth paradigm and undesirable ideologies like



extractivism, neoliberalism, and consumerism, thereby altering the cultural mindset; 3) Aspiring to a utopian society characterized by autonomy, sufficiency, and care (Fitzpatrick, Parrique, and Cosme 2022). While advocating an overall reduction in material consumption, degrowth scholars emphasize selective, qualitative growth in sectors contributing to the reproduction of life and societies, such as the care sector (Latouche 2010; Dengler 2021). Instead of pursuing quantitative economic growth (e.g., by shifting unpaid care work to the paid care sector), degrowth promotes qualitative growth, including more time for holistic care, fair wages, and dignified working conditions (Dengler 2021; Kreinin and Aigner 2021).

Dengler (2021) situates degrowth research within feminist theories of the economy, suggesting that due to the wide variety of feminist approaches, feminist economics can take both interrelated and conflicted positions regarding degrowth. Liberal feminist economics, which see female emancipation as integrated within paid employment (and individual capital accumulation), or feminist economics theorist, who contest that it is more straightforward to mobilise resources for feminist policies under economic growth. While this might be the case, this can only be a short-term strategy due to the escalating environmental crises and their interrelationship with increased economic production, and is also deeply colonial and problematic since the benefits of economic growth are mostly captured at the top, by (white) men. The top 1% of the richest people captured 2/3 of all wealth created by everyone since 2020, while the top 10% captured 90% of all wealth created - at the same time gender inequality is increasing, with nearly 60% of the people going hungry being women and girls (Christensen et al. 2023). It is clear that much feminist scholarship would do well to engage further with degrowth concepts. As Dengler (2021) explains, there are also three crucial feminist economics critiques which form the basis of degrowth: the feminist critique of (1) the gross domestic product (GDP), (2) the narrow concept of work, and (3) the *homo economicus*. (1) GDP fails to account for the essential contributions of ecological processes and unpaid caregiving activities to the economy - degrowth can enhance its critique of economic growth by engaging deeply with the feminist GDP critique (Waring and Steinem 1988; Dengler 2021). (2) Neoclassical economics, including Keynesian and classical Marxist perspectives, narrowly define work as wage work, which devalues other socially necessary forms of work, such as unpaid care work, subsistence work, and community work (primarily carried out by women due to gendered divisions of labor). Degrowth scholarship must avoid unintentionally perpetuating the narrative that work equals wage work, while this broader concept of activities can help avoid perpetuating hegemonic masculine hierarchies in any social-ecological transformation. Finally, (3) degrowth could more deeply engage with the feminist critique of the neoclassical concept of *homo economicus*, a deeply androcentric view of humans as rational, selfish, and independent, serving as a warning for degrowth not to idealize an eco-sufficient, isolated (male) hero, rather exploring how hegemonic masculinity contributes to unsustainable outcomes (i.e. through cars and meat consumption as status symbols), reinforcing the growth paradigm (Dengler 2021; Nelson 2020).

In his book “The Fabrication of Social Order”(2000), and its new edition, “A critical theory of Police Power” (2021) Mark Neocleous untangles the common roots of the modern productivist capitalist state and the institution of the police, which start at the end of feudalism. The institution is established for the violent enforced proletarianisation of paupers, and subsistence farmers pushed off the land - to enact “social order” and defend the (property of) newly emerging (male) merchant classes from the poor and to enforce productivity and the morality of the work ethic, as well as strict gender relations, (heteronormative) sexual mores, and racial hierarchies. Through the absolute discretionary power of the police the institution is endowed with the power to enforce and also decide what constitutes “good order”. Neocleous’ analysis of the deep roots of the “Imperialist White Supremacist Heteropatriarchy” (hooks 2004) in underpinning the productivist capitalist order, highlights that the destruction of nature, women, racialised “others”, and labour (Neocleous 2000) have a common root. It also emphasises the need for an ecofeminist degrowth, and degrowth feminist economics approaches, which do not shy away from looking directly at the uncomfortable center of the multiple crises - and our role in upholding the “liberal social order”.



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