Viewpoint

The anti-colonial politics of degrowth

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As degrowth ideas speed their way into social movements and academic research, they have encountered some interesting critiques. In a recent contribution to this Virtual Forum, Huber (2021) dismissed degrowth as a preoccupation of middle-class environmentalists in the global North who feel "anxiety" about excess consumption. Such a movement, he argues, can never hope to connect with the working class, who are struggling to get by, and certainly cannot connect with social movements in the global South, where mass poverty is widespread and where, he claims, the concept of degrowth is largely unknown. These claims constitute a significant misrepresentation of degrowth politics.

Let me begin by noting a few facts. High-income countries are the primary drivers of global ecological breakdown. The global North is responsible for 92 percent of emissions in excess of the planetary boundary (Hickel, 2020a), while the consequences of climate breakdown fall disproportionately upon the global South. The South already suffers the vast majority of the damage inflicted by climate breakdown, and if temperatures exceed 1.5 degrees centigrade, much of the tropics could experience heat events that exceed the limits of human survival (Zhang, Held, & Fueglistaler, 2021). Likewise, high-income countries are responsible for the majority of excess global resource use, with an average material footprint of 28 tons per capita per year – four times over the sustainable level (Bringezu, 2015). Crucially, these high levels of consumption depend on a significant *net* appropriation from the global South through unequal exchange, including 10.1 billion tons of embodied raw materials and 379 billion hours of embodied labor per year (Dorninger et al., 2021).

In other words, economic growth in the North relies on patterns of colonization: the appropriation of atmospheric commons, and the appropriation of Southern resources and labour. In terms of both emissions and resource use, the global ecological crisis is playing out along colonial lines. This is often framed as a problem of "ecological debt", but this language – while useful – hardly captures the violence at stake.

Just as Northern growth is colonial in character, so too "green growth" visions tend to presuppose the perpetuation of colonial arrangements. Transitioning to 100 percent renewable energy should be done as rapidly as possible, but scaling solar panels, wind turbines and batteries requires enormous material extraction, and this will come overwhelmingly from the global South. Continued growth in the North means rising final energy demand, which will in turn require rising levels of extractivism. Complicating matters further, decarbonization cannot be accomplished fast enough to respect Paris targets as long as energy use in the global North remains so high (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). To compensate for this problem, IPCC models rely heavily on bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) to get us out of trouble. But deploying BECCS at scale would require land for biofuel plantations up to three times the size of India, which would almost certainly be appropriated from the South. This is not an acceptable future, and is incompatible with socialist values (Hickel, 2020b).

Degrowth calls for rich nations to scale down throughput to sustainable levels, reducing aggregate energy use to enable a sufficiently rapid transition to renewables, and reducing aggregate resource use to reverse ecological breakdown. This demand is not just about ecology; rather, it is rooted in anti-colonial principles. Degrowth scholars and activists explicitly recognize the reality of ecological debt and call for an end to the colonial patterns of appropriation that underpin Northern growth, in order to release the South from the grip of extractivism and a future of catastrophic climate breakdown. Degrowth is, in other words, a demand for decolonization. Southern countries should be free to organize their resources and labor around meeting human needs rather than around servicing Northern growth.

Decolonization along these lines is a crucial precondition for successful development in the South. Dependency theorists have pointed out that "catch-up" development is impossible within a system predicated on appropriation and polarized accumulation. This is true also

from an ecological perspective. The alternative is to pursue a strategy of convergence: throughput should decline in the North to get back within sustainable levels while increasing in the South to meet human needs, converging at a level consistent with ecological stability and universal human welfare.

This much is straightforward. But there are further implications of degrowth that are worth drawing out here. For degrowth, the problem is not ultimately the behavior of individual "consumers" (as in mainstream environmentalist thought) but rather the structure and logic of the underlying economic system, namely, capitalism. We know that capitalism is predicated on surplus extraction and accumulation; it must take more from labor and nature than it gives back. As Marxist ecologists have pointed out, such a system necessarily generates inequalities and ecological breakdown. But many economic systems have been extractive in the past; what makes capitalism distinctive, and uniquely problematic, is that it is organized around, and dependent on, perpetual growth. In other words, capital seeks not only surplus, but an exponentially rising surplus.

To understand why this is a problem, we have to grasp what "growth" means. People commonly assume that GDP growth is an increase in value (or provisioning, or well-being), when, in fact, it is primarily an increase in commodity production, represented in terms of *price*. This distinction between value and price is important. In order to realize surplus value, capital seeks to enclose and commodify free commons in order extract payment for access, or, in the realm of production, to depress the prices of inputs to below the value that is actually derived from them. Both tendencies require appropriation from colonial or neo-colonial "frontiers", where labor and nature can be taken for free, or close to free, and where costs can be "externalized". In this sense, capitalist growth is intrinsically colonial in character, and has been for 500 years. Enclosure, colonization, mass enslavement, extractivism, sweatshops, ecological breakdown – all of this has been propelled by the growth imperative and its demand for cheap labor and nature.

Of course, there is nothing "naturally" cheap about labor and nature at the frontier. On the contrary, they have to be actively *cheapened*. To do this, European capitalists advanced a dualist ontology that cast humans as subjects with mind and agency, and nature as an object to be exploited and controlled for human ends. Into the category of "nature" they shunted not only all nonhuman beings, but also Black and Indigenous people, and most women, all of whom were cast as not-quite-fully-human, in order to legitimize dispossession, enslavement and exploitation (Federici, 2004; Patel & Moore, 2017). Racist discourses were leveraged to cheapen the lives of others for the sake of growth. Similar discourses are used today to justify wages in the South that remain below the level of subsistence (Hickel, 2020d).

Degrowth, then, is not just a critique of excess throughput in the global North; it is a critique of the mechanisms of colonial appropriation, enclosure and cheapening that underpin capitalist growth itself. If growthism seeks to organize the economy around the interests of capital (exchange-value) through accumulation, enclosure, and commodification, degrowth calls for the economy to be organized instead around provisioning for human needs (use-value) through de-accumulation, de-enclosure and de-commodification. Degrowth also rejects the cheapening of labour and resources, and the racist ideologies that are deployed toward that end. In all of these ways, degrowth is about decolonization (Hickel, 2020b; Tyberg, 2020).

These demands align strongly with those of social movements in the global South. This is clear, for instance, in the People's Agreement of Cochabamba, drafted in 2010 by thousands of grassroots organizations from more than 130 countries. The Cochabamba statement explicitly attacks the economics and ideology of growthism and explicitly critiques excess resource use in the global North ("hyper-consumption") as the driver of "overexploitation and unequal appropriation of the planet's commons" (WPCC, 2010). It calls for rich nations to address their ecological debt by reducing resource use to sustainable levels, "decolonizing" the atmosphere, and ending the exploitation of poorer

countries. It also calls for a different model of development, one that is focused on human wellbeing within ecological boundaries, rather than on perpetual growth. In other words, the Cochabamba statement articulated degrowth demands from the South well before the concept gained traction in the North.

These ideas have a long history in anti-colonial thought. Fanon (1963:314–315) critiqued Europe's growthist model, lamenting that Europe had "shaken off all guidance and all reason" and was "running headlong into the abyss." "Let us be clear", he wrote: "what matters is to stop talking about output, and intensification … Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation." Gandhi (1965:51–53) noted that the industrial growth of Europe and the US depended on plundering the South. He called for Southern countries to collectively refuse this arrangement, thus forcibly reducing the "surfeit" of rich countries. He rejected growthism and argued that production should be organized instead around human needs and sufficiency, enabling people to pursue the "art of living nobly" rather than "a complicated material life based on high speed". Julius Nyerere (1960s) and Thomas Sankara (1980s) likewise championed a sufficiency-oriented approach to development, which they saw as key to national self-reliance and thus to throwing off neo-colonial power.

The critique of growth was in large part pioneered by thinkers in the global South, including Rabindranath Tagore, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and the economists Radhakamal Mukurjee and J.C Kumarappa (Gerber & Raina, 2018). These perspectives have been developed further by figures such as Amin (1987), Öcalan (2015), Shiva (2013), Shrivastava and Kothari (2012). Critiques of growth are represented in the environmental justice movement (Martinez-Alier, 2012), within movements such as the Zapatistas and in Rojava (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019), in the buen vivir movement (Acosta, 2020), in the food sovereignty movement (e.g., Campesina, 2018), and in the broader post-development literature (e.g., Escobar, 2015; Kothari et al., 2014; Kothari et al., 2019), all of which have their roots in the global South. Degrowth scholarship and activism is aligned with these movements, with demands directed specifically at the North. It is the sharp edge of anti-colonial struggle within the metropole.

So what about the class politics of degrowth in the North? How do we reconcile degrowth with the reality of working-class poverty? Degrowth scholarship points out that energy and resource use in high-income nations is vastly in excess of what is required to end poverty and to deliver high levels of wellbeing for all, including universal public healthcare, education, transportation, computing, communication, housing, and healthy food (Millward-Hopkins, Steinberger, Rao, & Oswald, 2020). In other words, high-income nations could scale down aggregate throughput while at the same time *improving* people's lives by organizing the economy around human needs rather than around capital accumulation—that is, by distributing income and wealth more fairly, while decommodifying and expanding public goods (Hickel, 2020b). These are core degrowth demands. After all, degrowth is part of the broader ecosocialist movement. What degrowth adds is the assertion that growth in high-income nations is not required in order to achieve a flourishing society. What is required is justice. Recognizing this is part of building class consciousness against the ideology of capital (Hickel, 2020c). But even more importantly, what is the point of a progressive politics in the North that is not aligned with the struggle for decolonization in the South? Ecosocialism without anti-imperialism is not an ecosocialism worth having. And in the face of ecological breakdown, solidarity with the South requires degrowth in the North.

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