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Working Paper

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Working Paper, No. 179/2022

Provided in Cooperation with:

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Suggested Citation: Hennen, Sonja (2022) : Concepts of justice in the degrowth debate, Working Paper, No. 179/2022, Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin, Institute for International Political Economy (IPE), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/253644>

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Concepts of Justice in the Degrowth Debate

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Working Paper, No. 179/2022

Editors:

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Concepts of Justice in the Degrowth Debate

Sonja Hennen

Abstract

Degrowth's search for a qualitatively and quantitatively different economy is given legitimacy by the severity of the socio-ecological crisis, paired with a lack of evidence that resource use and environmental impact can be decoupled in absolute terms at a meaningful point in time and studies refuting the trickle-down hypothesis. However, there are few accounts of the potentially adverse effects of a halt of perpetual economic growth on the livelihoods of already marginalized and vulnerable communities and the general justice of a degrowth transition. This paper analyses to what extent Environmental Justice theory (EJ) could compensate for this deficit and thus contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of justice in the degrowth concept. To do so, the paper firstly establishes gaps across central pillars of degrowth reasoning with regards to a just transition. It discusses evidence that degrowth seeks global socio-ecological justice on distributive grounds and with respect to recognition but falls short in conceptualizing the role that structural power systems (both on micro and macro level) as well as institutional governance mechanisms play in advancing a globally just degrowth transition. The second section of the analysis highlights those concepts within critical EJ theory that, based on the gaps identified, could enable a more extensive understanding of the necessary parameters for a just degrowth transition, namely in the areas of recognition, decoloniality, and theory of the state.

Keywords: degrowth, socio-ecological crisis, environmental justice, theory of the state

JEL code: F54, H10, O44, Q56, Q58

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Acknowledgements:

For their valuable comments and advice, I am most grateful to Prof. Dr. Markus Wissen and Joëlle Saey-Volckrick. Any remaining errors are mine alone.

1 Introduction

Over the past decades, there has been a worldwide growing conflict between the economy and the environment. Driven by the continuous expansion of the industrial system, the repercussions of the destruction of global ecosystems, overconsumption, and climate change, are experienced by an augmenting number of communities to the point of ecological crisis. Already, humanity has trespassed four of nine planetary boundaries, which are defined as the safe space for human activity given the internal processes that sustain the Earth's biophysical systems (Steffen et al., 2015).

The accelerating appropriation of the world's resources and rising global inequality have affirmed the notion that economic growth is an attraction pole for issues around social justice, ecological sustainability, and welfare (Agyeman et al., 2002). However, in spite of vivid debates with respect to the ecological and social limits to growth and the repercussions of economic growth on matters of justice, notions of growth and development for the longest time, and in most economic and political forums, enjoyed a practically unquestioned legitimacy. As a response to worsening socio-ecological conditions, mainstream economics has conceived the *green growth* paradigm, which is based on the presumption that environmental sustainability and infinite growth are in fact compatible policy objectives. Green growth advocates surmise that GDP can be entirely decoupled from resource use and carbon emissions, a claim that is not supported by mounting empirical evidence, which indicates that no absolute decoupling of resource use and carbon emissions from GDP can be observed on a global scale (Parrique et al., 2019; Hickel & Kallis, 2020).

Today, more and more scholars agree that curbing material growth is urgently necessary to mitigate climate change, biodiversity loss, ecological distribution conflicts (EDCs), and other related crises (Steffen et al., 2015). Proponents of the *degrowth* movement go as far as arguing that in a world with limited resources, infinite economic growth is neither desirable nor sustainable (Lange, 2018; Gómez-Bagetthun & Naredo, 2015). Building on a large body of research indicating that ecological sustainability and economic growth are likely incompatible, degrowth scholars advocate for a “democratically-led shrinking of production and consumption with the aim of achieving social justice and ecological sustainability” (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p.3). According to degrowth reasoning, the ecological crisis - driven by sustained economic growth beyond planetary boundaries - presents a significant ethical dilemma to the international

community as it deepens overall inequality and without much doing from their end, over-exposes already vulnerable communities to increasingly large environmental ills.

However, economic and political actors largely recognize that the living conditions in the global South¹ in material terms need to be ameliorated and that a change in current conditions, such as a declining consumption in the global North, might negatively affect communities currently dependent on global value chains (Beling et al., 2018). In this context, it is often asserted that growth is a necessity to fight poverty and a key tool to enable people to obtain a decent living standard (Akbulut et al., 2019). While the ability of growth to remedy matters of social welfare and justice is heavily debated, concerns as to whether shrinking global production levels can be achieved without high collateral damages in particular at the periphery of the capitalist world were re-elicited at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis.

To date, topical literature only contains a superficial engagement with the possible negative (short-term) consequences of degrowth's envisioned transition on the livelihoods of marginalized and vulnerable communities. What is more, general accounts of the global justice of a degrowth transition have so far remained fragmented in degrowth debates. To overcome some of these gaps, a growing number of scholars have called for a closer integration of concepts originating from Southern theoretical paradigms and activist movements into the degrowth frame.

One such movement is the Environmental Justice (EJ) movement, which despite having been conceived in the United States (US) over the past three decades has increasingly served as a rallying ground for environmental and social activism in communities around the globe. While there are also numerous other notable socio-ecological movements originating in the global South, such as the post-development approach *Buen Vivir* from Latin America or *Ecological Swaraj* from India (Kothari et al., 2014), whose convergence with degrowth is debated with varying intensity by scholars, embracing EJ as an analytical perspective allows for a particular understanding of the immense diversity of meanings and strategies among communities striving for social and environmental justice. It is this heterogeneity that degrowth is confronted with as it aims to enable a globally just reduction in material throughput.

This paper intends to add to this important discourse by asking in which ways an integration of core ideas present in EJ reasoning into the degrowth framework could provide

¹ In line with topical literature (e.g. Gerber & Raina, 2018) 'global South' should not be understood exclusively as a geographical concept. Rather, irrespective of their geographic location, 'global South' is used as a collective term for populations which are excluded, disadvantaged and subjected to poverty, environmental destruction and displacement within the current socio-economic and political system (Escobar, 2015).

the latter with a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of justice. To accomplish this, a qualitative inductive content analysis is conducted and structured as follows. Firstly, both the degrowth paradigm and EJ theory will be introduced and situated within their broader research frames. From this analytical contextualization, the core tenets underpinning the degrowth movement are derived and analyzed with respect to their adequacy to facilitate a just reduction of selected economic activities. Thereby the paper discusses evidence that degrowth seeks global socio-ecological justice on distributive grounds, but falls short in conceptualizing answers to the role that structural power systems and institutional governance mechanisms play in advancing a globally just degrowth transition. The second section of the analysis highlights those concepts within critical EJ theory that, based on the gaps identified, could enable a more extensive understanding of the necessary parameters for a just degrowth transition, namely recognition, decoloniality, and theory of the state. The final section offers concluding remarks.

2 Analytical Framework

2.1 The Concept of Degrowth

Over the past few decades, the ‘post-growth’ research agenda has grown into one of the major contributions of ecological economics. Rather than viewing the economy in purely monetary terms, ecological economics analyzes the matter and energy flows that the economic system is embedded in (Powers et al., 2019). Given this presupposition, ecological economists reason that environmental problems are a direct result of economic activities exceeding ecosystem capacities. This contrasts with explanations provided by neoclassical economists, who argue that environmental degradation is related to market failures (Cosme et al., 2017). The substantial research generated in ecological economics has separated into three major currents, namely *a-growth*, *steady-state economics*, and *degrowth* (Akbulut et al., 2019).

The degrowth movement can hardly be narrowed down to a single comprehensive definition given its numerous theoretical sources. However, in its current academic renaissance, degrowth can be described as the aim to re-politicize the debate on the relationship between sustainability, the economy, and the society, in order to liberate conceptual space for a socio-ecological transition (Kallis et al., 2014). Degrowth as an economic and social concept is a direct critique of the notions of green growth, sustainable development, and ecological modernization (Latouche, 2009; Asara et al., 2015). In its essence, degrowth argues for a “democratically-led shrinking of production and consumption with the aim of achieving social justice and ecological sustainability” (D’Alisa et al., p.3). The goal is to achieve a quantitatively

smaller but qualitatively enhanced economy which respects ecosystems and the environment, promotes social equity, and ameliorates human well-being (Petridis et al., 2015).

The growth critique first started flourishing in the early 1970s, when rising concerns about pollution, environmental degradation, and rapid population growth, prompted a critique of mainstream economic reasoning. This critique was reflected in the 1972 Club of Rome report '*Limits to Growth*' that fundamentally opposed the viability of endless economic growth. The growing skepticism towards the mainstream economic growth paradigm also found its way into the first Earth summit held in Stockholm in 1972 and two years later the Cocoyoc symposium, which openly appealed to the physical limits of growth and related issues of social justice (Gómez-Baggethun & Naredo, 2015). At the same time, ecological economists like Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1971) alerted the world to the impossibility of growing incessantly on a planet with finite resources due to the laws of thermodynamics and ecology, and culturalist theorists such as Illich (1978) and Gorz (1975) went as far as openly questioning the notion of 'development', opposing the adoption of Northern production and consumption models across the world (Latouche, 2009). It is in these early culturalist and ecologist critiques of mainstream economic thinking that degrowth has its intellectual roots.

The term degrowth is a translation of the French word '*décroissance*' and was first coined by André Gorz, a pioneer in political ecology, in the political and cultural arenas of France in the beginning of the 1970s. Despite being picked up by several authors following the release of the Limits to Growth report, the interest for a critical engagement with the economic growth paradigm in the spirit of degrowth faded in parallel with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, and did not revive until the turn of the century. In the years that followed, a series of conferences with hundreds of participants eventually established the degrowth movement as an international research community (D'Alisa et al., 2014; Asara et al., 2015).

In line with ecological economics, degrowth builds on the premise that on a planet with limited resources, internal and external limits to growth turn economic growth into an unfeasible and unsustainable endeavor (Gómez-Baggethun & Naredo, 2015). From a degrowth perspective, the obsession with growth in mainstream economics, including the debt-fueled expansion of the economy, are hence a direct cause of the socio-ecological crisis (Kallis et al., 2014). Confronting the currently dominant neo-classical and Keynesian economic paradigms, degrowth therefore calls not only for a reduction of resource and energy throughput in order to restore ecological sustainability, but also rejects the very logic of growth. As Serge Latouche, one of degrowth's key figures, argues, it is the 'social imaginary of growth' that needs to be

questioned (Latouche, 2010). Therefore, there is a growing consensus that the degrowth concept extends to a holistic critique of the capitalist system which at its core necessitates exploitative growth (Asara et al., 2015).

Unlike orthodox economics, degrowth rejects the ecological modernization notion which posits that a solution to the ecological crisis is anchored in new technologies and efficiency improvements. While the role of technology is debated, degrowth scholars doubt that technological innovations alone suffice to overcome biophysical limits and counterbalance the ecologically devastating effects of infinite economic growth (Demaria et al., 2013). This argumentation is partly sourced from theories on the *rebound effect* (or Jevon's Paradox), which posit that in a capitalist growth-regime eco-efficiency gains are often reinvested into further consumption and production activities that offset prior improvements (Polimeni et al., 2008). Hence, degrowth advocates point to the clear correlation between GDP and resource use, questioning theories on absolute decoupling that are commonly referred to in order to substantiate the concept of green growth. In fact, mounting empirical evidence supports the degrowth notion, in that at planetary scale, growing pressure on ecological life support systems runs in direct parallel with increases in GDP (Jackson, 2009).

In the past, degrowth scholars have also strongly emphasized the normative dimension of a degrowth transition, noting that degrowth is not to be confused with an economic recession. This is why the reduction of GDP is not a goal of degrowth in itself, but rather a welcomed consequence of an equitable and socially sustainable reduction of society's material throughput, where close attention is paid to the increase of ecological sustainability, social justice and well-being. The goal is to ultimately achieve a fair distribution of resources both within and among countries (Cosme et al., 2017). Many scholars agree that such a transition can only be achieved if the structures that underlie our societies and economies are fundamentally altered (Asara et al., 2015; Petridis et al., 2015). Degrowth proposals therefore not only fall within the scope of economic but also political debates (Kallis, 2011). Generally, degrowth seeks to scale down ecologically destructive activities, while expanding socially important sectors, such as healthcare and education (Hickel, 2020). The goal is to facilitate a transition from a materialistic to a participatory and convivial society (Cosme et al., 2017; Parrique, 2019). In this context, degrowth also draws inspiration from debates around well-being, the commons, voluntary simplicity, care and frugal abundance, arguing that a voluntary reduction of consumption can in fact be liberating rather than limiting as it creates space for relational rather than economic activities (Demaria et al., 2013; Gerber & Raina, 2018).

2.2 Environmental Justice

2.2.1 Origin and Characteristics

The concept of EJ was born in the 1980s in the US among Black and Latino communities, where it started off as a set of political movements in the wake of the unequal distribution of exposure to environmental hazards along the lines of class, race, gender and income (Bryant & Mohai, 1992; Bullard & Johnson, 2000). As part of the ongoing struggle to defend their environment and livelihoods against capitalist appropriation, degradation and dispossession, over the span of the last four decades communities all around the world have rallied under the umbrella of EJ, thereby marking the emergence of a new kind of environmentalism, which closely ties to anti-racism and civil rights concerns (Menton et al., 2020).

The first theoretical investigation of the EJ movement was undertaken by sociologist Robert Bullard (1990), who intensively examined the link between race, poverty and exposure to pollution. Academically, EJ conflicts are mostly studied within the scope of political ecology and environmental sociology (Temper et al., 2015). In the beginning, EJ conflicts were mostly portrayed as being at the centre of the socio-spatial distribution of environmental ‘bads’, such as toxins and emissions, and environmental ‘goods’, such as access to parks and green spaces (Temper et al., 2015). Over time, the EJ movement has extended its scope beyond the unequal distribution of exposure to environmental hazards and has since expanded conceptually, geographically and politically. Decades of research indicate that what started as political resistance to hazardous waste dumped in poor communities in the US is in fact universal and representative for global struggles for environmental justice. Its dual character as a place-specific concept as well as worldwide movement turns EJ into a powerful lens to conceptualize in more depth the connection between Northern and Southern environmentalisms whilst not seizing to account for the immense diversity of meanings and strategies that are associated with such struggles (Sikor & Newell, 2014).

EJ is characterized by the fight for the just distribution of environmental burdens and benefits (including their absolute reduction), the halting of excessive consumption and material use, and the fair access to natural resources (Bullard & Johnson, 2000; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). In 1991, the First People of Color Environmental Leadership summit issued a document providing a framework for these and a number of other core principles underlying the vision of EJ (Sze & London, 2008). The document illustrates the wide scope of EJ concerns, including the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity, the right to self-determination and

autonomy, the rejection of the exploitation and oppression of lands, people and other forms of life, and the interdependence of all species (Sze & London, 2008; Menton et al., 2020). At the same time, the summit document ascertains the strong opposition of EJ to corporate pollution, complicity of governing agencies, and the histories of colonialism, racism and genocide of traditional and indigenous ways of life (Sze & London, 2008). EJ movements also actively encourage and demand a discourse around alternatives to the mainstream notion of capitalist growth (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Given its core concerns, EJ disputes the mainstream ‘post-materialist’ interpretation of environmentalism. The preservation of the environment is not considered a luxury but rather a means for immediate survival (Martinez-Alier et al., 2020; Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020).

EJOs (Environmental Justice Organizations) have long been serving a multipurpose, oftentimes working in coalition to promote socioeconomic equality and environmental sustainability (Agyeman et al., 2016). Recent scholarship has also tried to include non-anthropogenic multi-species conceptions of justice inspired by indigenous notions of well-being and a ‘good life’ into the EJ framework. This understanding of justice is rooted in what anthropologist Enrique Salmón (2000) calls ‘kin-centric ecology’, an environmentalism that emphasizes the deep interdependence with the rest of life as kin. At their core, EJ struggles are struggles about our ways of knowing (epistemology), being (ontology) and valuing (Singh, 2019). Therein lies more than the mere advocacy for a fair distribution of environmental burdens. Rather, EJOs demand that matters of recognition and participation also be considered (Temper et al., 2015; Schlosberg, 2009). With this struggle comes an innate focus on justice, which over time has formed EJ advocacy in scope and strategy.

2.2.2 Evolution of a Framework

Not only is the EJ movement broad in geographic and contentual scope, but it has also shifted spatially and temporally in its self-understanding, embracing new aspirations, strategies and political meanings over time. Thereby, a more complete framing of the complex and intersectional nature of injustices in the global South and the power dynamics sustaining them has emerged (Holifield et al., 2017; Menton et al., 2020).

The ‘mainstream’ EJ framework has most notably been developed by David Schlosberg (2004, 2009), who in various publications introduced the four EJ pillars of (1) *distributional justice*, (2) *recognition justice*, (3) *procedural justice* and (4) the *capabilities approach*, which builds on the works of Amartya Sen (1999), Martha Nussbaum and Nancy Fraser (1997).

Hereby, distributive justice not only refers to the fair distribution of wealth and income, but can also be considered when people have equal rights, opportunities, and liberties (Cosme et al., 2017). The distributive justice paradigm has sparked a prolific body of literature across various theoretical disciplines, but has been criticized for its neglect of the social structures and institutional contexts in which distributive patterns are conceived, failing to thoroughly address the social, cultural and institutional conditions that sustain poor distributive patterns (Schlosberg, 2004; Menton et al., 2020). Justice as recognition asks whose interests and visions are acknowledged and valued, capturing both the individual right to self-recognition and the recognition of collective identities, needs and desires. Procedural justice on the other hand questions the conditions of decision-making, touching upon who is involved and able to influence the process of defining actions and choices. This requires an understanding not only of unjust distributive patterns and lack of recognition, but more importantly a conceptual grasp of how the two are tied together in the institutional processes of a state (Schlosberg, 2013; Menton et al., 2020). The capabilities approach analyzes not just the distribution of goods, but how they connect to the capabilities of individuals and communities to flourish (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). Schlosberg (2013) argues that justice can only be conceived when it is addressed and achieved in each of the four realms.

Notwithstanding the relevance of the aforementioned dimensions, more critical currents have developed in EJ scholarship over time, calling for an extension of the mainstream framework. At the core of such demands for reforms lies the critique that EJ literature focuses too strongly on institutional reforms or policy concessions while failing to sufficiently address the power structures that produce environmental injustices (Menton et al., 2020). *Critical EJ scholarship* has therefore made efforts to embrace decolonial theory, which focuses on countering the consequences of the colonality of power (a term based on the works of Quijano (2007)) that subjugates people and their knowledge and value systems to those of the colonial force (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020).²

Such decolonial reasoning is particularly prominent in the EJ theory of Latin America, where authors such as Escobar (1998, 2011) in their works emphasize the decolonial and anti-modernity agenda present in indigenous peoples' struggle for EJ. In so doing, critical EJ theorists try to make visible more strongly the connection between political economy and

² The term 'decolonial' is being used unintelligibly by different schools of thought. This paper follows the notion of the modernity/decoloniality project (decolonial theory) originating in Latin America (Escobar, 2007). Decolonial theory distinguishes between colonialism and colonality, where the former refers to the political and economic domination under colonial rule, and the latter to the power matrix still at work within post-colonial, contemporary societies (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020).

environmental inequality, calling attention to the fact that environmental conflicts are not conceived in isolation, but rather a consequence of the domination of vulnerable communities through economic, political and epistemological means. Such power imbalances are visible for example in the industrial social-metabolism, where spatial fractures between the places of production and consumption of environmental goods and bads along capitalist commodity chains allow for an outsourcing of environmental injustices (Muradian et al., 2012; Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020).

In a similar vein, critical EJ justice scholarship has contributed towards highlighting the ‘*commodification of justice*’ (Velicu, 2019), casting light on the necessity to address underlying patterns of oppression in order to derive a sound theory of justice. Otherwise, marginalized communities “are seeking to buy an equal share of whatever justice is. (...) Once a people accepts a place at the master's table, it is doomed to manipulation, cooptation and perpetual frustration” (Benford, 2005, p. 52). Other scholars, such as Escobar (2015), have used the term ‘*cognitive justice*’ to describe how traditional ontologies are co-opted by the dominion of capitalist and extractivist ideologies, showing that EJ struggles are also struggles about ontologies and conceptions of justice.

Therefore, critical EJ theorists argue that EJ must not solely strive after recognition by or inclusion in dominant institutional and cultural structures as advanced by more traditional EJ theorists. Rather, they reason that while important, the reliance on legal rights and recognition granted by states in itself cannot be considered sufficient to attain justice (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). This goes hand in hand with a more general critique of the appropriateness and ability of the state to bring about solutions to the problems of minority groups. While being acknowledged and heard in state-based forums is often perceived as a straightforward alley to addressing grievances, research on EJ has indicated that state involvement rather than being effective, can sometimes be a disadvantageous means to overcoming injustices (Pulido et al., 2016). Hence, critical EJ activists have tried to catalyze the imagination of “forms of freedom that are not dependent on recognition by the liberal state” (Pulido & de Lara, 2018, p.77), expanding the notion of recognition beyond state-based solutions to include self-recognition - the restoration of the value of one’s way of life (Coulthard, 2014).

As a movement, EJ with its various currents challenges dominant neoliberal, capitalist discourses, thereby shaping the political capacity of many marginalized communities around the world, heightening political consciousness and manifesting disagreement with, and in some cases, changes of the status quo (Pulido et al., 2016). Initiated and carried by voices from the

margins, the perspectives on justice within the EJ movement have been formed in a context distinctly different to the Northern academic frame of the degrowth movement. Hence, with their embrace of a multitude of marginalized communities all around the world, critical currents of EJ in particular seem to be a potentially promising sparring partner with the possibility to help overcome gaps in present degrowth debates.

3 Critical Analysis

3.1 A Just Degrowth Transition

So far, this paper has shown that degrowth aims for an equitable and socially sustainable reduction of material throughput in order to achieve an increase in ecological sustainability while simultaneously enhancing social justice and well-being. However, while a reduction of material throughput in high-income countries is a notion that can sensitively be defended given the latest empirical evidence on the correlation between environmental degradation and economic growth, the effects of a degrowth transition on less developed regions is a complex field of investigation with implications far beyond the economy. Degrowth has gained momentum above and beyond in a European context and organizations from the South have hardly participated, or been invited to participate, in its conceptual development.³ While a lot of informal commitment has been paid in the community to the need to examine how degrowth should and could relate to similar movements from the global South, only few studies have actually been conducted in this research field (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Hanaček et al., 2020). This gap in degrowth literature is said to have contributed to a lack of focus on equity concerns and the investigation of the impacts of a shrinking material throughput and GDP on particular geographic areas and peoples (Perkins, 2019). Where there have been debates on the implications and applicability of degrowth for the global South, they have largely escaped consensus among degrowth scholars (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019). The following section will hence enlarge upon the streams of thought evoked as part of said debate by use of a qualitative inductive content analysis (Mayring, 2004). The goal is to identify current degrowth concepts for a globally and socially just reduction of resource use levels and environmental impact and their gaps.

³ There are few exceptions to this, but some degrowth authors have actively called for shared conceptual discussions and dialogue with thinkers and activist movements from the South (e.g. Martinez-Alier, 2009; Asara et al., 2015; Akbulut et al., 2019).

Drawing from a degrowth literature review conducted for this paper, as well as from previous systematic categorizations of the prevalent themes in existing literature (e.g. Cosme et al., 2017; Hanaček et al., 2020), this section identifies and focuses on four essential theoretical tenets underlying degrowth reasoning with highest relevance to the research question: the reduction of material throughput and the environmental impact of human activities; the fair distribution of resources both within and among countries; the creation of conceptual space for the global South; and the transition from a materialistic to a convivial society. Each tenet will subsequently be screened and revised for its implication for a just degrowth transition and possible gaps therein.

3.1.1 Tenet 1 - Reduction of the Environmental Impact of Human Activities

Given its intellectual roots in ecological economics, a major theme in the degrowth debate is the aim to realize a controlled dematerialization of the economy in order to minimize the impact of human activities on ecosystems and the environment. It has been vividly argued by degrowth proponents that this will only be achievable if economic activities in particular in the global North are critically reduced given that rebound effects render an absolute decoupling of GDP from resource use highly unlikely.

Based on this, degrowth critics have warned that a dematerialization of the economy to the envisioned extent will unjustly threaten livelihoods in peripheral economies depending on global value chains (Muradian, 2019; Rodriguez-Labajos et al., 2019). Without a thorough analysis on how to create the structural conditions enabling Southern economies to carve out their own development paths, critics predict significant barriers in relating and translating the concept of degrowth to communities subjected to poverty and scarcity, who (at first sight) have little to gain from degrowth (Muradian, 2019). This argumentation builds on the indication that a reduction of resource use to the extent envisioned by the degrowth movement could lead to fewer opportunities for manufactured and commodity exports and hence lower revenues in countries of the global South, as well as less availability of credits and donations (Martinez-Alier, 2009).⁴ As a consequence, low-wage workers in the export industries in these countries would be faced with adverse effects through potential losses of income streams. It has therefore

⁴ Some streams of literature argue that the effects of a reduced consumption level in the global North might not have drastic effects on export industries in the South at all, due to increased South-South trade and rising consumption levels fueled by a rising share of middle- and upper-class individuals and an overall growing population in the South (e.g. Dengler & Seebacher, 2019).

been criticized that degrowth places the long-term goal of socio-ecological justice above the present lived realities of poor communities around the globe (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019).

While the possible effect of a degrowth transition - namely the interruption of global value chains due to a decrease in material throughput in the global North - might threaten the jobs of geographically and socially marginalized workers, degrowth scholars argue that proposals beyond extractive capitalism are urgently needed to achieve social and ecological justice for global communities. Main streams of degrowth literature have affirmed that this reduction in material throughput to a sustainable steady-state will take place in form of a planned and gradual reduction focused on economies currently transgressing their safe and fair shares of resources and energy in accordance with planetary boundaries. This excess share of resources can and has been calculated, possibly setting the ground for the negotiations and structures around a transition (Hickel, 2019, 2020; Büchs & Koch, 2019). A targeted reduction of the environmental impact of human activities is hence considered a lever to greater economic and social justice (Hickel, 2020; Muraca, 2012; Glotzbach & Baumgartner, 2012).

The degrowth literature is also rich in proposals that address the mitigation of ecological harm penetrated by economic growth, such as green taxes applied to carbon and resource use or wealth caps (Kemp-Benedict, 2018) as well as the concept of ecological debt, which stipulates that the global North should pay for past harm provoked in form of colonial exploitation and environmental degradation of the global South (Demaria et al., 2013).

Taken together, such proposals would not only enable greater sustainability but generate funds that could be invested in projects to restore biodiversity or used to alleviate the harmful financial impacts on low-income groups caused by their comparatively higher income spending on energy and resource use as well as the loss of jobs in export industries. However, given the largely irreversible ecosystem degradation and the non-substitutability of natural capital, a compensation in merely monetary terms might not be fully adequate (Gabriel & Bond, 2019). Degrowth scholars alongside the global scientific and political community have yet to grow clearer on other ways to compensate for past ecological injustices.

3.1.2 Tenet 2 - The Fair Redistribution of Resources

Degrowth is not only focused on ecological sustainability, but also on social equity, acknowledging that “any truly sustainable transition must also be socially just” (Gabriel & Bond, 2019, p.327). As such, the fair distribution of and access to resources between and among countries, especially against the backdrop of the historically uneven appropriation of ecological

and atmospheric commons through the global North, is a key concern of the discourse (Hickel, 2020). However, some scholars (e.g. Muradian, 2019) have cautioned that without growth as the engine for redistributive policies, the degrowth movement might interrupt crucial upward mobility paths in developing economies. Poor communities, so the argument, rely on economic growth because it will eventually ensure that some portion of the so created wealth will fall into their hands, the *trickle down hypothesis* (Snowdon, 2006).

This hypothesis has been refuted by degrowth scholars, based on a growing consensus in academia indicating trickle down is a myth (e.g. Stiglitz, 2016), which is why degrowth scholars instead call for a more active income redistribution and reduction in the case of global elites. This is based on the premise that economic growth largens the gap between rich and poor and can never eradicate poverty in relative terms, as it only changes the scale but not proportions of wealth accumulation among individuals (Demaria et al., 2013). Moreover, growth fuelled inequality is strongly linked to environmental degradation, both through the high-resource lifestyles of global elites and consumption fuelled status races (Raworth, 2017). Therefore, rather than investing in continuous exploitative growth in order to reduce poverty, degrowth pledges for a fair price level for the labor and resources provided to the worldwide economy by the global South, which would allow for greater economic justice while most likely resulting in a decrease of the rate of disproportionate accumulation by economic elites, thereby benefiting ecologies in the global South (Hickel, 2020).

Most recently, critics have hinted at the COVID-19 recession as an example of why a degrowth of production and consumption would be disastrous (Hickel, 2020). Claimed to be a somewhat involuntary degrowth experiment, albeit little aware of societal consequences, the COVID-19 outbreak has led to an observable decrease of CO₂ emissions and resource consumption (Cohen, 2020). This decrease was accompanied by the interruption of global value chains and a massive drop in certain industries, such as tourism and transportation, threatening the jobs of geographically and socially marginalized workers. Simultaneously, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted in rare clarity the flaws of an economic system failing both the less privileged, as well as increasingly those who have thus far benefited from it (Everingham & Chassagne, 2020). Degrowth advocates therefore continue to defend the search for different parameters around the trajectory forward, highlighting the need for change both for human communities and the planet. Importantly, degrowth scholars routinely point out that a recession, as the one induced by the COVID-19 crisis, is distinctively different to a degrowth transition, which would be planned, gradual, and discriminating (e.g. scaling back ecologically destructive

activities while fostering socially important ones), all the while actively seeking to reduce inequality, enhance human well-being and protect the environment, goals which are typically put on the back burner during times of crisis (see Hickel, 2020 for an in-depth argument).

Measures that the degrowth discourse has suggested in order to reach the planned fair redistribution of resources range from more progressive taxation schemes and living wage policies to universal basic incomes (UBI) and the reduction of excessive incomes and wealth (Demaria et al., 2013; Hickel, 2020). However, many degrowth studies to date have proven to be mostly problem- rather than solution-oriented (Parrique, 2019), which at times leads to ambiguous policy proposals that do not always feature precise parameters to elaborate on. In combination with a lack of more sophisticated empirical projections, it is therefore difficult to comment on whether these envisioned measures will suffice to truly compensate for any losses in terms of revenues, jobs, and social mobility suffered by more vulnerable population groups as selected economic activities degrow. Moreover, with a few exceptions such as the concept of ecological debt, most degrowth proposals in their current scope target redistribution measures within one country as global policies would be even harder to develop and implement. Consequently, a lot of the proposals may not necessarily help everyone along the production chain.

Irrespective of the possible discrepancy between design and effects of degrowth proposals in distributive terms, there is a perhaps more significant limitation yet to be addressed. The implementation and maintenance of fair distribution processes, whether it be environmental, social or economic goods, presupposes the existence and effectiveness of stable political systems and instruments (Glotzbach & Baumgartner, 2012). To date, the degrowth debate does not have a sufficiently developed theory of the state. While there has been a recent intellectual advance by D’Alisa and Kallis (2020), who suggest a combination of grassroots and institutional actions in Gramscian line of thought to facilitate a degrowth transition, core degrowth debates do not conceptualize state theory. In fact, most articles published on degrowth ask for a voluntary reduction of consumption by individuals “who live beyond their own measures of sufficiency” (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019, p.466). Those proposals which feature top-down rather than bottom-up proposals are largely conceived in a vacuum, missing a clear indication of the type of governance structure the proposals are supposed to be achieved in. While there is a tension in the movement between proponents of reformist, state-based approaches and more radical, non-capitalist visions (Kallis, 2018), most scholars have argued that degrowth within the capitalist system is impossible to achieve and current political,

economic and monetary institutions would have to be reformed or replaced to enable a transition (e.g. Foster, 2011; Richters & Siemoneit, 2019; Barmes & Boait, 2020; Hickel, 2020). Without a clear vision on how this is to be accomplished, it cannot be considered guaranteed that social equity under degrowth can be facilitated. Especially the dimension of justice as recognition and procedural justice demand a clear notion of governing institutions, their design, and role in ensuring communities are fairly recognized, represented and respected in decision-making forums.

3.1.3 Tenet 3 - Creation of Conceptual Space for the Global South

Most degrowth authors emphasize that their goal is to achieve degrowth only in high-income countries exceeding their fair shares of resources in accordance with planetary boundaries (Hickel, 2019). Some degrowth scholars opine that such a dematerialization strategy in the North would in fact enable less developed countries to grow (Martinez-Alier, 2012), while others emphasize that degrowth first and foremost creates conceptual space beyond the hegemonic development paradigm for the South to define their own version of a good life and the role that growth plays in achieving this life (D'Alisa et al., 2014). What degrowth scholars, such as Hickel (2020), mean when they speak of conceptual space is a shift away from Southern economies' currently enforced role as exporters of cheap raw materials and labor towards the creation of economies focused on sovereignty, human well-being and sufficiency. Hickel (2017) maintains that this would entail a return to the economic and political philosophy pursued by many governments in the global South during the post-colonial era in the 1960s and 1970s. Even today, post-development concepts opposing a fossil-based economy and capitalist accumulation are well represented in the global South (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019). This way, room could be provided for already existing ideologies to unfold. Most voices in the degrowth discourse emphasize that it is exactly this thriving plurality of worldviews (*'a pluriverse'*) (Escobar, 2015) that they strive for.

However, other intellectual streams such as eco-Marxism have been reluctant to endorse this notion, reasoning that degrowth lacks an adequate theory of imperialism and decolonialism and hence overlooks that the capitalist system is not only driven by production and consumption, but mostly by domination and power (Foster, 2011; Brand, 2015). This creates the risk that degrowth could stop at addressing the ecological crisis while neglecting political, social and class crises (Perkins, 2019). Given the complex power matrix that is the global economic system, hinting at the creation of conceptual space without critically reflecting on its

coloniality might not suffice. In this context, Escobar (2015) points to degrowth's insufficiently developed critique of modernity and development, worsened by the missing inclusion of activist and intellectual voices from South Asia and Latin America around the topic of decoloniality. The lack of engagement with ontological, epistemological, and cultural perspectives outside the traditional Northern dominated academic theories heightens the risk of a failure to critically engage with intersectional inequality dimensions penetrating the mainstream economic system, such as class, gender, or ethnicity (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). Moreover, such missing engagement might create yet another precedent where the global North is setting the agenda for solving global problems without integrating communities from the global South in the discussions on eye level (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019).

3.1.4 Tenet 4 - Transition from a Materialistic to a Convivial Society

Rather than merely pertaining to economic activities, degrowth encompasses deeply normative elements, such as voluntary simplicity and the commons (Demaria et al., 2013). Many of these normative visions have their intellectual foundations in the global South (Gerber & Raina, 2018). However, being a Western-conceived concept, degrowth has been said to struggle to include ontological, epistemological, and cultural perspectives from other parts of the world. Critics have therefore warned that the movement is removed from the history of communities subjected to exploitation, poverty and scarcity, which minimizes its ability to successfully relate to and remedy concerns from people living at the economic and social margins (Cosme et al., 2017; Muradian, 2019).

The idea to enable conceptual space for the South, as introduced above, is a direct consequence of and sourced by the vision of an 'other-than-capitalist' world. Degrowth signifies a critique of the accelerated expansion of economic activities under the capitalist system and in so doing calls for a society in which fewer resources will be used and life will be organized according to principles such as simplicity, care and conviviality (Kallis, 2018). Degrowth thereby attempts to challenge the commodification of the social imagery through the omnipresence of market-based relations in people's everyday existence (Kothari et al., 2014).

In aiming for an 'other-than-capitalist' world, degrowth touches upon a dimension of justice also present in the EJ movement, namely the *commodification of justice*, thereby trying to bring awareness to the possible corruption of marginalized communities by the capitalist growth paradigm, which in the absence of meaningful options incentivizes them to desire to be part of the system despite it infringing on their territories and ontologies (Velicu, 2019). This

can partially be explained when considering that growth-based capitalism, rather than being merely a macro phenomenon also extends into the micro spheres, as it manifests itself culturally in people's minds and daily practices (Büchs & Koch, 2019). Moreover, the growth paradigm is deeply rooted not only in the economic system, but also the systems that have co-evolved around it, such as the nation state, legal and financial institutions and the welfare system. To achieve an 'other-than-capitalist' world is therefore an intricate and possibly fragmented process with unclear outcomes, especially given the current lack of decolonial reasoning in integral degrowth literature (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019). More so, from a macro perspective, the unclear stance on the role of the state and its co-systems as well as the call for voluntary bottom-up processes irrespective of their effectiveness (Cosme et al., 2017; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019) cast doubt on the achievability of a transition to a world beyond the capitalist growth paradigm in alignment with voices from the South.

Hand in hand with the goal to achieve an 'other-than-capitalist' world goes the focus on the deeply normative questions of what constitutes a good life and how to enhance human well-being. Traditionally, economic growth plays a key role in the answers to these questions. Degrowth scholars in contrast argue that a good life for all is impossible to achieve within planetary boundaries if current growth trajectories in high-income nations persist (Hickel, 2019). In a degrowth society, reduced material throughput is not associated with a decrease of life quality, but with a re-evaluation of the factors that actually contribute to our well-being (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019). This argumentation is sourced partially from the literature on happiness economics, which analyses the disconnect between increases in income and life satisfaction (a phenomenon also known as the *Easterlin Paradox*). Again, progressive tax schemes, wealth caps, and job guarantees are a few of the tools considered suited to ensure this equitable downscale of material throughput towards a good life not only in the global North, but also global South.

While the notion of a society with stronger focus on relational and caring aspects overlaps with values stipulated in indigenous philosophy, it remains questionable if a discourse about the good life beyond growth is a priority for, and resonates with the visions of those concerned with defending their immediate livelihoods. In any case, it is paramount to warrant that marginalized communities are not left behind in defining and voicing what they perceive as the good life in order to ensure meaningful participation in decision making processes, hence enabling procedural justice and justice as recognition. As previously shown, these patterns of recognition may have to be renegotiated in the face of structural intersectional dimensions of

injustice within the current economic system and its institutions. With degrowth still being in search of a proper decolonial theory, all the while remaining undecided between reformist, state-based and non-capitalist approaches (Kallis, 2018), this process will likely be a challenging one.

3.2 Lessons from Critical Environmental Justice Theory

What has become clear is that degrowth as a Northern-dominated concept is still caught in the ongoing process of addressing the broad spectrum of consequences of its planned transition. This process has yet to be conducted in more intimate conjunction with voices from the social, economic and geographical margins. This is why some scholars have argued in favor of an alignment with socio-ecological justice movements from the global South. As mentioned prior, EJ has been born and operates in a context distinctively different to the degrowth frame. However, one of the most intuitive commonalities among the two movements is their shared concern around the starkly exacerbated inequality in the currently dominant mainstream model of economic growth and development that favors the lifestyle of a small global elite, while impoverishing and threatening the existence and livelihood of many others. Aligning with the call for a conceptual confluence between EJ and degrowth brought forth by a number of recent publications, as part of the central research question this section assesses the ways in which the EJ movement could help to extend the inclusivity of the degrowth discourse, focusing on the dimensions and gaps identified in section 3.1.

As the introduction into EJ theory has shown, the movement is permeated both by mainstream and more critical currents. With their call for a critical reflection on the power structures that produce environmental injustices and the recognition of non-Western ways of life beyond state-based solutions, critical EJ currents seem to be particularly suited at offering interesting and beneficial perspectives on topics largely not yet formulated in degrowth reasoning.

Recognition

One of the major identified shortcomings in current degrowth reasoning is the lack of a thorough integration of ontological, epistemological, and cultural perspectives from the global South, for example with respect to the needs of workers and poor communities dependent on global value chains or the concerns of critical decolonial thinkers from the global South.

EJ activists traditionally perceive themselves as outsiders to the cultural, political and economic mainstream. As such, they experience the misrecognition and devaluation of their identities and ways of life both on the individual and community level (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020). Entering into a more intimate dialogue with EJ activists would afford degrowth with the opportunity to recognize marginalized knowledge, benefit from active community participation and enable a much greater diversity among degrowth proposals.

To date, critics argue that degrowth mainly represents the values and interests of a highly educated European green middle class (Muradian, 2019). Engaging with and, most importantly, listening to EJ activists could help relate the degrowth proposals to the concerns of disadvantaged communities in other parts of the world and understand more clearly the concerns and aims of members of said communities. This holds true for the academic debate as much as the broader movement. From EJ theory, degrowth can learn that striving for recognition necessarily demands a thorough interrogation of the conditions which sustain and fuel the injustices inflicted upon marginalized communities (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020). This circles back to the need to integrate decolonial reasoning more prominently into degrowth debates, as well as to define more clearly the role institutions play in facilitating a globally just degrowth transition and ensuring recognition for communities in the global South.

Importantly, given that the growth paradigm is not only rooted in the nation state, legal and financial institutions and the welfare system, but also manifests itself culturally in people's minds and daily practices (Büchs & Koch, 2019), it is crucial to acknowledge what critical EJ theory has long been arguing, namely that psychological processes play an essential role in causing the misrecognition of communities by systematically depriving them of their symbolic and material modes of living (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020). Consequently, more than merely broadening the scope of communities which are heard and listened to, a just degrowth transition necessarily has to include setting in motion the process of self-recognition, and therein an acceptance of the ways of life of marginalized communities as equal (Coulthard, 2014; Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020).

Conceptually, if a sufficient number of individuals are afforded the opportunity to reaffirm their identities and beliefs, over time, a process like that opens up the prospects for the creation of counter-discourses and counter-narratives to the mainstream, enabling systematic changes and cultural emancipation (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). Practically, this process necessarily has to include a promotion of degrowth scholars originating from outside the Northern European mainstream as well as moving research on Southern epistemological

perspectives from the margins to the centre of degrowth's research agenda. In the end, this also adds another crucial element of justice where monetary compensation for evoked environmental and social harm is not enough. This is not to say that financial compensation is not important, for example for workers who are threatened to lose their jobs as a consequence of a degrowth of production in the global North. However, many communities in the global South, and in particular indigenous communities, are distressed more gravely by the detriment of their identity and personal integrity (which are sustained by the biophysical conditions surrounding them) rather than solely by financial losses (Schlosberg, 2004). Compensation can and should therefore never take place exclusively in monetary terms, but has to be focused on the recognition of ways of life different to capitalist notions of modernity without infringing on the fundamentals for these different ways of life.

To this end, moving closer towards the in previous sections introduced kin-centric environmentalism present in EJ movements could be a starting point for degrowth to grow more prolific in conceptualizing and advancing recognition for communities in the global South (Temper, 2019). While it may not seem all that important, understanding nature primarily as capital which provides goods and services (as is often assumed in ecological economics) is in and of itself not politically neutral and alien from the perspectives of people living and working in intimate conjunction with nature (Hanaček & Rodríguez-Labajos, 2018). Directly inspired by indigenous notions of well-being, kin-centric ecology (Salmón, 2000) calls to mind the deep interdependence with the rest of life as kin and could thereby help degrowth scholars in defining proposals, strategies and opportunities beyond the anthropocentric mainstream perspective on society-nature relations, in order to enable a transition that truly resonate with communities which have suffered from the repression and exploitation of their lands and life-forms.

In certain ways, such as with its call for other-than-capitalist ways of life and a renaissance of relational and caring aspects of social togetherness, degrowth is already embracing values stipulated in the philosophy of many traditional and marginalized communities. The movement can make even bigger strides if these communities do not just lend their values and knowledge, but are actively empowered to shape their own future. This process might look different in each place, depending on the place-specific history, culture and environment. In any way, a path towards recognition, at least on the institutional level, will likely only be achievable if structural intersectional dimensions of injustice within the current economic system and its institutions are addressed and remedied.

Decoloniality

Another important shortcoming in degrowth reasoning discussed in the previous part of this analysis is the low level of engagement with post-colonial and decolonial traditions of thought. To date, joint research on decolonial theory and degrowth only comprises a minor part of the existing literature (Hanaček et al., 2020). Even though degrowth has the potential to disrupt existing power relations and aims to create conceptual space for a pluriverse in which different perspectives, histories and identities find a place, this will likely not happen as an automatic side-effect to the many proposals put forth by degrowth advocates but has to be enforced through a conceptual recalibration of degrowth's research scope.

In contrast to degrowth reasoning, critical EJ thinking has developed in close conjunction to decolonial thought. Especially EJ currents from Latin America in the tradition of authors such as Escobar (1998, 2011) lend crucial perspectives on the matter of coloniality, and thereby the manifold ways in which the colonial power matrix to date still permeates contemporary, officially politically independent economies in the global South (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). Coloniality, the result of the nexus of power, knowledge and ontology, is reflected in the “*asymmetric possibility to ignore*” (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019, p.250), which affords the global North with the opportunity to disregard knowledge from the global South, but not vice versa. This highlights the often subtle or invisible ways in which dominance is exercised over marginalized communities, namely by pushing forward particular knowledge traditions, narratives and worldviews at the expense of others (*epistemic violence*) (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018).

From the perspective of critical EJ activists, coloniality is a direct form of misrecognition. Hence, the goal should not solely be the inclusion of other ways of knowledge into the degrowth frame, but more so to independently recognize and invigorate already existing forms of knowledge, community organizing and decision making approaches in the global South - and to do so systematically (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). Degrowth scholars can accomplish this for example by actively becoming students of decolonial critical EJ theory and entering into constant reflection rounds with EJ activists in order to challenge their own knowledge, power and beliefs. Another way is the critical engagement with existing hegemonic networks of power in socio-environmental conflicts through means of knowledge networks dedicated at challenging and re-shaping existing ideas of development, sustainability and justice; networks that give legitimacy and public visibility to marginalized knowledge (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). More so, it is important to repeatedly question the universal

legitimacy of degrowth's frameworks and proposals. While degrowth is a geographically-tailored approach, its effects are global. This warrants the need to take on place-based perspectives and establish a 'victim-centered' approach to justice (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020). In each case, there is a need for degrowth researchers to critically reflect on and transparently articulate the context of their studies and their own situatedness as - in most if by far not all cases - researchers from privileged Northern backgrounds (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019).

Theory of the State

To date, degrowth lacks a sufficiently developed theory on the role of the state and the institutions that have co-evolved around it. Reverting mostly to voluntary grassroots means, this leaves the movement with a weak indication on the governance mechanisms that are necessary to enable degrowth reforms and guarantee social and environmental justice. Ultimately, this issue manifests itself across all degrowth tenets, even if it is perhaps most clearly reflected in the aim to promote a fair distribution of resources. Generally, current scholars remain doubtful on the prospects of achieving a degrowth transition within the current political, economic and monetary system, indicating that a proper theory of state will be hard to conceptualize but all the more important with respect to the movement's future.

EJ activists have long been confronted with the conflicting role of the state in enabling change. Some valuable lessons are to be drawn from their experiences. Firstly, EJ is clear that the aptness and capability of the state to bring about solutions to the problems of marginalized groups remains highly doubtful (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). This can be explained for example through the fact that in setting the boundaries for imagining what is possible and desirable, the state plays a crucial role in co-opting the desires of minority groups. Moreover, the state is directly involved in the reproduction of colonial patterns of disadvantage, relying on the effectiveness with which dominated cultures can be enticed to accept the asymmetrical forms of recognition imposed on them by governing institutions (Coulthard, 2014). Consequently, a lot of communities cannot and do not consider options outside of the framework set by the state as they lack alternative powerful sparring partners to turn to (Pulido et al., 2016).

EJ theory does not have an academically derived theory of the state, and different EJ movements have been divided on their success rates with respect to ameliorating the social and environmental quality for vulnerable communities and advancing their goals. EJ movements in the US have traditionally tried to find meaningful solutions to their problems through a

cooperation with the state. However, in many cases this endeavor has been unsuccessful in extracting substantive protection from the state for affected communities. The reasons for this range from lack of political will to the countless challenges individual communities deal with, to the absence of meaningful regulation (Pulido et al., 2016). On the other hand, indigenous people immersed in environmental struggles in Latin America have been much more successful in paving their way towards greater social and environmental justice. Since the 1980s indigenous people, driven by the increasing pressure exerted over their territories and identities by extractive initiatives, have consistently advocated for their right to self-determination and autonomy. What differentiates them from other EJ movements is the construction of cultural, environmental and communal rights in their regions, re-establishing their own political agency independent of the validation through state institutions. Through the assertion of local organizing and community management, EJ activists have created their own alternatives to official governance institutions such as the nation state (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020). Their success is reflected both in the better protection of their rights in comparison to other global regions, as well as their remarkable impact on the national constitutions in many Latin American countries, which in recent decades have been reconfigured to become increasingly pluricultural (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018).

As degrowth scholars elaborate on the nature and form of their reforms and their relationship to liberal institutions, the differences in EJ activisms and their slightly conflicted approaches to the role of the state can provide valuable input for future considerations. One of the lessons that can be drawn from this divergence is that securing meaningful change through a mere reliance on the state will likely not be sufficient. One reason for this is that oftentimes, the inclusion in existing institutions and decision-making councils takes place in a tokenistic way or leads to the co-optation of local leaders; another that some communities, often indigenous ones, do not recognize the sovereignty of liberal institutions in the first place and hence refuse to be included in existing governance structures (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018; Temper, 2019).

Therefore, independent grassroots driven local governing seems to be a necessary complement, especially given its unique advantage of being sourced directly by the specific needs and desires of the affected communities. Of course, the ability of grassroots organizing to remedy structural problems as such is limited. In any way, a complete detachment from the state would never be possible given that political and environmental struggles like the ones by EJOs inevitably confront institutions (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020). What seems to be needed is

a mixed approach to governance, similar to what D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) have suggested in their latest work on the role of the state, where change is enabled through a restructuring of narratives on the level of civil society and then embodied and facilitated on an institutional level in a dialectical interplay between civil and political actors. In terms of institutional engagement, critical EJ theory favors the construction of participatory and inclusive decision-making institutions, which encourage the active participation of marginalized communities, to the point where public participation is formally institutionalized and effective cross-cultural formats put in place (Schlosberg, 2004). Degrowth as a movement should remain aware of these insights when contemplating governance mechanisms, while degrowth as an academic debate should focus more strongly on developing a consensus with regards to the political economy of a transition. A singular study as the one conducted by D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) cannot by itself be considered sufficient to equip the debate at its core with a profound theory of state.

Another important point can be made with respect to the role of the state as it is understood in critical EJ theory. This point is related to the desire of marginalized communities to not only be recognized by the state, but also to be afforded the already mentioned right to self-recognition (Coulthard, 2014). While intertwined, these institutional and psychological dimensions of recognition have their own level of importance to marginalized communities (Alvarez & Coolsaet, 2020). Therefore, state-based recognition, while in some aspects essential, should not be the only and ultimate goal. Rather than mere participation in existing institutions, achieving justice also requires the ability to obtain self-governing authority (Temper, 2019). On a subjective level, it is therefore indispensable that degrowth grows ever more active and determined in seeking the input and participation from interest groups and communities in the global South. Without affording them explicit opportunities to shape, embrace or repulse degrowth strategies in relation to their identities and needs academically and practically, self-recognition cannot be brought about. This includes leaving space for the construction of other ways of knowing, researching, practicing policy, structuring society, and acting in relation to modernity (Walsh, 2007). What degrowth can take from EJ, if not a concrete idea of the theory of the state, is that neither the subjective nor institutional sphere should take precedent over the other. Rather, both have to be carefully considered to enable a globally just degrowth transition.

3.3 Discussion

The preceding analysis indicates that the lack of evidence that an absolute decoupling of resource use and environmental impact will be possible at a meaningful point in time, as well

as studies refuting the trickle-down hypothesis and the causality between increases in income and life satisfaction, paired with the severity of the socio-ecological crisis, give legitimacy to degrowth's search for a qualitatively and quantitatively different economy. At its core a deeply normative discourse, degrowth touches upon many different dimensions of justice, such as socio-ecological justice on a global scale, distributive justice, or epistemic justice. In doing so, degrowth aims to safeguard the possibility of present and future prosperity for communities currently suffering the ills from climate change through a planned and gradual reduction of selected economic activities; ensure a fair price level for the labor and resources provided by the global South, and hence greater economic justice through a decrease in the accumulation rate by economic elites; build on traditional post-development concepts in the global South as to release peripheral countries from their enforced role as cheap exporters of resources; and enable a good life for all as part of an 'other-than-capitalist'-world. In that, degrowth is sympathetic both towards ameliorating future conditions for communities across the globe, for example by restoring biodiversity and ecosystem sufficiency with the means of green taxes, wealth caps and so forth, and remedying past injustices inflicted on the global South by global elites, for example as part of an ecological debt compensation scheme.

However, degrowth proposals have also attracted substantive criticism. Said to insufficiently account for the consequences of interrupted global value chains as material throughput in the global North declines, or the power structures that sustain many of the present imbalances in the current economic system, this analysis has substantiated that despite the many sensible proposals present in degrowth reasoning, and the inevitable necessity to reach for alternatives beyond the current perpetual growth model, in crucial ways a degrowth transition has no answers to the consequences of its envisioned changes (yet). What stands out the most is perhaps the only rudimentary attention that has been paid to a proper theorization of the state in degrowth literature. To date, degrowth scholars looking for reforms within an existing institutional setting largely release their policy proposals into a void. Those who aim for more revolutionist reforms in spirit of self-governed sufficient communities "lack a clear theory of transformation other than through a collapse after which, for some unexplained reason, political organization will evolve towards their desired configuration" (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020, p.7).

At the same time, even though degrowth as a Western conceived concept has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to and inspiration from socio-ecological movements and activist thinkers from the global South, the dominant academic research to date leaves essential ontological, epistemological, and cultural perspectives from the margins at the margins of its

research. Crucially, decolonial lines of thought are to date not properly integrated into degrowth scholarship, despite a number of recent publications which have tried to outline possible cornerstones of a decolonial degrowth approach (e.g. Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Singh, 2019).

All of this is not to say that there is a total lack of accountability in the degrowth movement for the adverse implications of a transition for the global South. However, as a movement that with its transformative policy agenda challenges the boundaries of the capitalist system, policy makers, economists and critical thinkers engaged with degrowth are demanded to conceptualize the consequences and opportunities of an unknown territory. This is where an integration of concepts originating from movements with a grassroots history opens up the possibility to address gaps and questions to which the degrowth movement does not yet have a decisively formulated response.

In reference to these key gaps in degrowth reasoning, critical EJ currents can prove essential in the following regards. While it may be obvious that the integration of the diverse ontological, epistemological, and cultural perspectives present in EJ struggles can enhance the breadth and inclusivity of the degrowth discourse, the perhaps most essential lesson to be drawn from EJ activism is that the invigoration and protection of already existing forms of community intelligence as independent and valuable entities is more important than the reference of other ways of knowledge within the degrowth frame.

A degrowth discourse that wants to appeal to communities in the global South and do justice by them hence has to create the right conditions for the process of self-recognition (Coulthard, 2014; Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). Essentially, this also warrants the deep engagement with decolonial traditions of thought on a personal, as well as academic level. Coloniality, as a direct form of misrecognition, erodes the necessary conditions for a community's well-being, including their self-respect and cultural identity, therein weighing equally as heavy as financial detriment (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). Only a critical, consistent and committed engagement with decolonial theory can prevent the degrowth movement from perpetrating existing patterns of oppression. Helpful in this context seem to prove the notions of decoloniality sourced from Latin American lines of thought, which developed in close conjunction with critical EJ theory in the region.

With respect to the unclear relationship between degrowth and the state, the lessons to be drawn from EJ movements are a bit more fuzzy. Individual EJ movements for their reforms have leaned on institutional frameworks to different extents. While EJ struggles showed that groups relying on grassroots community mobilization aimed at re-establishing political agency

independent from state institutions have been more successful at securing change than those who relied on access to existing decision-making forums, some proposals of a degrowth transition critically depend on governance mechanisms. One such example would be the compensation of marginalized workers in peripheral economies that financially depend on global value chains. Most likely, only a local government would have the means to mitigate these effects for example by issuing job guarantees, redistributing tax income or establishing UBIs (Mastini et al., 2021). What seems to be necessary is a civil society momentum which can be channeled into a more institutional setting at a later stage. Herein lies the complexity of a transition away from a manifested system, such as is the capitalist one.

Ultimately, the integration of EJ concepts into degrowth reasoning is an endeavor not without flaws and complications, but with potential for elementary insights into how existing gaps in degrowth research can be addressed and perhaps overcome. This process will not be a linear one but one that slowly meanders in tandem with the dialogues, discussions and reflection rounds among the diverse actors and scholars in EJ and degrowth movements committed to addressing the socio-ecological crisis where most other actors only defend the status quo.

4 Conclusion

Environmental justice movements and the degrowth discourse have grown from different sources of struggle in different contexts but share their resistance against the strongly exacerbated inequality in the currently dominant mainstream model of perpetual economic growth. While growth-based capitalism is linked to the accelerating degradation of the world's ecosystems, climate change, EDCs and social injustices, the degrowth transition as a possible pathway to overcoming these conditions to date remains a largely theoretical framework with partly uncertain and possibly adverse effects on communities in the global South.

The necessity to conceive solutions beyond the mainstream growth paradigm together with the challenges linked to such an endeavor from a global justice perspective have motivated the research in this paper. The conducted research demonstrates that rather than being a merely economic concept, degrowth with its proposals transcends into the realms of political, social and moral considerations. Degrowth is committed to the democratic, gradual downscaling of selected economic activities in the global North in order to enhance social and ecological conditions; and its proposals are geared to ensure that a transition would be a fair undertaking to different communities around the world. Preventing future ecological destruction, achieving greater social equality through means as varied as UBIs, wealth caps and ecological taxes, and

the reparation of past injustices through monetary means such as the ecological debt scheme are a few of the channels for change discussed among degrowth scholars. If constructed appropriately, these tools could have the ability to mitigate at least some of the adverse effects linked to a degrowth transition. Yet, more research is necessary to substantiate the true costs and effects of individual degrowth proposals as a majority of them remain somewhat vague in theory and have not been tested empirically.

The Western dominated degrowth movement has also explicitly sought the engagement with socio-ecological movements and epistemological perspectives originating from contexts different to its own, such as indigenous notion of well-being and conviviality. Nevertheless, the concepts for a globally and socially just reduction of resource use levels and environmental impact presented in degrowth reasoning are not gapless. In particular, decolonial theory, theories on the role of the state, and elementary epistemological and ontological perspectives from people living at the margins, such as their communal identities in relation to nature and their self-understanding in the face of oppressive institutions, to date remain under-accounted for among the tenets of degrowth reasoning. Without further elaboration and research on these topics, a just degrowth transition cannot be considered assured.

Despite the criticisms raised in this paper with respect to degrowth's ability to deliver a globally just transition towards a quantitatively reduced and qualitatively enhanced economy, the research also gives rise to optimism. Driven by the devastating impact of the socio-ecological crisis on their livelihoods, diverse critical movements around the world have formed under the umbrella of EJ to reclaim agency in defending their right to social and environmental justice. From their activism and history, valuable lessons can be drawn with respect to overcoming the contemporary gaps in degrowth reasoning. To this extent, I have argued that in particular critical EJ theory offers promising insights into the crucial need to afford marginalized communities the right to self-recognition, both on a psychological and institutional level. The engagement with critical EJ theory has also elicited the importance of carving out space for disadvantaged communities to create their own epistemological, ontological and cultural realities, as well as to critically reflect on the power dimensions which currently make the former impossible. This process could for example be initiated by reverting to the Latin American theory of decoloniality. At the same time, the diverse approaches to igniting institutional change exercised by different EJ struggles show the need for a coalescence of civil society impetus with structural reforms on state level.

Crucially, the point at hand is not to turn degrowth into a stand-alone panacea to the socio-ecological crisis. Rather, degrowth must prevail amid and thrive in combination with political, cultural and economic propositions advanced by other socio-ecological movements such as EJ. Undoubtedly, a lot of work is left to be done in order to achieve a globally just degrowth transition that is economically, socially and institutionally potent. Yet, against the context of the rapidly accelerating socio-ecological crisis, now more than ever is the time to embark on more in-depth research with respect to the demands, configurations and cornerstones of such a transition. If degrowth is seriously to be considered as a tool towards greater socio-ecological justice, then more research is needed which is dedicated to the strategy and political stimulus necessary to overhaul the growth imperative with its current close ties to our institutional, financial, and social systems including the intersectional dimensions of power weaving them together. In this context, degrowth scholars need to more clearly outline their relationship to existing governing mechanisms in form of a proper theory of the state, integrate decolonial theory into core degrowth reasoning and overall grow more precise in developing the theoretical and empirical foundations of their proposals. More in-depth elaboration is also required on the manifold ways in which degrowth might unintentionally reproduce existing inequalities between global North and South, how it might change local metabolisms in peripheral economies and how to appeal more strongly to the minds of those caught in the credo of perpetual growth and consumption in order to liberate space for new economic, ecological, and social trajectories on a civil society level. In this sense, an active engagement with the needs, experiences and desires from critical advocates living in parts of the world which have a long-standing history of countering hegemonic narratives is a morally necessary and strategically sensible tool in order to enable a globally just reduction of resource use levels and environmental impact beyond any gaps currently present in degrowth reasoning.

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Imprint

Editors:

Sigrid Betzelt, Eckhard Hein (lead editor), Martina Metzger, Martina Sproll, Christina Teipen, Markus Wissen, Jennifer Pédussel Wu, Reingard Zimmer

ISSN 1869-6406

Printed by
HWR Berlin

Berlin April 2022