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Degrowth Enthusiasm and the Transformation Blues of the East: Reflections on Integrating Post-socialist Transformation Experiences into the Degrowth Discourse*

Jana Gebauer^a, Gerrit von Jorck^b, Lilian Pungas^c

Abstract

This paper traces the links between post-socialist transformations and the degrowth movement. Based on a series of workshops entitled “Degrowth Enthusiasm and the Eastern Blues” that we organised in recent years, this paper focuses on the following questions: what can we learn from the state-socialist societies’ transformation processes into capitalist societies? What experiences and practices before and after these transformations can potential degrowth societies build on? To what extent can people’s experiences with an alternative system and its transformation contribute to unfolding their potential in a social-ecological transformation and to overcoming ‘change fatigue’? We present key findings from our workshops, which we combined with our own empirical evidence from Estonia and a theoretical examination of (post-)socialist economics to form six theses that we consider essential for a decolonial degrowth debate.

JEL codes: O44, P28, P30, P31, Q01, Q12

Keywords: degrowth, social-ecological transformation, post-socialist transformation, subsistence farming

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1. Introduction

Whatever the different interpretations of the current state of our societies, one thing is certain: we are not living in the best of all possible worlds. Many people and diverse movements are therefore searching for alternative models of society and ‘the good life’ for all. One of these movements is called “degrowth”.¹ Proponents of this approach are fundamentally critical of the growth imperative of the high-consumption societies of the Global North and the resulting dramatic environmental, social and democratic deficits. The alternative outlined by degrowth is growth-independent societies whose modes of production and living are consistently socially and ecologically just and enable all people, both globally and in the future, to live a good and self-effective life.

The path towards degrowth societies requires profound and emancipatory social change. In Europe, this fundamental transformational demand meets the older generations’ experiences with transformation in the former socialist countries. These experiences are rich in insights into whether and how, under which conditions and within which limits processes of profound and emancipatory change are desirable and can be ‘shaped’. As Christoph Links and Kristina Volke (2009) set out specifically for Eastern Germany, they also reflect a unique empowerment of people, a “head start in the search for alternatives”. Sociologist Steffen Mau (2019), on the other hand, also notes a certain ‘change fatigue’ among the latter.

However, a real link between past and aspired transformation processes is rarely established. And while degrowth activists of the younger generations call for the next “Great Transformation” (Polanyi 2001) with much normative power but little empirical grounding, such demands seem to be unattractive to people with a ‘transformation background’ and to even trigger defensive movements. The post-socialist transformation processes in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 hit their populations hard. De-industrialisation was followed by a catastrophic economic decline, a sharp rise in unemployment and persistent processes of marginalisation and exclusion. While post-socialist societies remained dependent on growth and became even more growth-oriented in the course of the neoliberal turn, the social and political consequences of the transition years are still present today.

Given these experiences, it is not surprising that people in the former socialist countries are not very enthusiastic about further attempts to transform society. However, the experiences and skills that people acquired before, during and after the times of upheaval are relevant to the degrowth discourse in many ways. They provide valuable information on how transformations unfold and can be shaped at all. The exchange and processing of these experiences not only illuminates the potentials, obstacles, and limits of such processes of change, but also point to the conditions and (power-)strategic necessities for successful and emancipatory change. In addition, existing and anticipated lines of conflict and confrontation will become more tangible. Last but not least, the older generations in ‘the East’ can enrich the young degrowth discourse with substantive impulses from their personal life experiences with a different social system. Learning from this and relating these experiences to current emancipatory and social-ecological transformation efforts is, in our view, an opportunity that should not be missed.

Our starting point is a series of events we have organised in recent years under the title “Degrowth Enthusiasm and the Eastern Blues”. In this paper, we present and discuss what we, as researchers positioning ourselves as part of the transformational degrowth debate, have learned from these events and their further embedding for a social-ecological transformation. To this end, we will compile the outcomes of three events that we held in Malmö in 2018, in Jena in 2019 and in Berlin in 2020.

¹ In the international debate, degrowth and post-growth are understood as different approaches. This differentiation between degrowth and post-growth also exists in the German-language debate, although the terms are also often used synonymously due to the difficulty of translating degrowth. We follow the synonymous use here and use post-growth in the transformational understanding of degrowth (see next section).

We will focus on the following questions:

- What can we learn from the state-socialist societies' transformation processes into capitalist societies?
- On which experiences and practices before and after these transformations can potential degrowth societies build?
- To what extent can the people's experiences with an alternative system and its transformation contribute to unfolding their potential in a socio-ecological transformation and to overcoming 'change fatigue'?

The structure of the paper follows these three guiding questions. After an introduction to the transformational post-growth discourse, we first approach the issue from an economic perspective. Based on the transformation theory of the economist Janós Kornai, we trace the systemic change from state socialism to capitalism and discuss the implications for a social-ecological transformation towards a post-growth society. We will show that a post-growth society must be clearly distinguished from Kornai's shortage economy and explain key factors for a successful transformation. We then take up the dacha culture, one of the everyday practices that is still widespread and culturally relevant in Central and Eastern Europe. We show that this form of semi-subsistence farming can be linked to the degrowth discourse, but that it has so far been marginalised, especially in Western debates, as a backward emergency provision. We argue that both individual and collective dacha gardening can be seen as a transformative practice of a good and successful life beyond a mere subsistence function. These theoretical and empirical approaches provide the framework for the three workshops we will then present. It becomes apparent that the question of learning from processes of upheaval is seen as very important for a successful social-ecological transformation in all events, i.e. in all contexts. The potential of this exchange of experiences is seen less in concrete answers to the challenges of a social-ecological transformation, but rather in the joint reflection on lived practices, alternative economic frameworks for action and concrete challenges in the transformation process. For this purpose, analytically separating the period before and after 1989/90 is not sufficient. Rather, a broader temporal (and thus systemic) perspective is needed, including the experience of state socialism. The paper concludes by looking ahead and assessing which aspects of post-socialist transformations should be further explored from a degrowth perspective.

2. Degrowth as a critical discourse of transformation

In societal transformation processes, the prevailing economies, lifestyles, political institutions and socio-cultural norms change, and new types and models of society emerge (cf. Reißig 2014). Not all currents within the degrowth movement explicitly represent such a comprehensive transformation perspective, which, according to Brand (2014), intervenes deeply in social conditions and their development dynamics (cf. Adler 2015; Eversberg/Schmelzer 2016). The degrowth perspective, transformational in this sense, refers to various discourses and disciplines of social and cultural critique (Demaria et al. 2013; Schmelzer/Vansintjan/Vetter 2022; cf. Gebauer 2019): sufficiency- and commons-based ideas from ecology and ecological economics are used to show why and how nature and ecosystems can be withdrawn from extensive economisation, i.e. the primacy of economic exploitation, and thus be preserved. The recourse to bioeconomy, however, highlights the extent to which high-consumption economies depend on the availability of natural resources and sinks, requiring radical reductions in their excessive material and energy flows. The post-development movement criticises the Western understanding of development and progress, which has been spread and enforced globally as an "imperial mode of living" (Brand/Wissen 2021). The perspective highlights the positions of development-critical scholars and activists from the Global South, who have drawn their lessons from the Washington Consensus – the development policy guideline of neoliberalism – and advocate a regionalisation of their economies. The feminist critique points to the economic blindness towards reproductive activities, which are mainly performed by women, and which are systematically devalued and exploited to the point of perpetuating the crisis. This perspective therefore calls, among other things,

for a re-evaluation and redistribution of labour, placing reproductive and caring activities at the centre of new, gender-just supply contexts. The fact that many of these debates do not take place is attributed to democratic deficits, which show that the question of scale is crucial for the democratic capacity of organisations and systems: large institutions, companies, value chains and technical systems are no longer democratically controllable and should be made smaller, more manageable, and democratic. It is therefore essential to address growth constraints of profit-oriented economic activity as a systemic problem and to intervene strongly in the economy dominated by large corporations through divestment, unbundling and socialisation. In this sense, (industrial) technical systems and infrastructures should always be subject to risk caveats, and technology should be designed democratically and “convivially” (Illich 1973). Finally, the climate justice movement criticises the lack of awareness of social inequality and ecological injustice in the sustainability debate and explores how justice and sustainability can be reconciled.

Given this diversity of currents, there is no one generally valid position within the growth-critical movement, for example about which societies and economies are desirable and achievable in the future. Schmelzer, Vansintjan and Vetter (2022) summarise what they see as a common ground of emancipatory degrowth societies as follows: degrowth societies enable global ecological justice by radically reducing their own material metabolism. Furthermore, they strengthen social justice and self-determination and strive for a good life for all people under the conditions of a reduced metabolism. To this end, they redesign their institutions and infrastructures to enable a good life for all and to exist independently of economic growth.

Schmelzer, Vansintjan and Vetter (2022) see the re-evaluation and redistribution of work, including a radical reduction in working hours, the fair distribution of income and wealth, and the transformation of social security systems, as central pathways for fundamental social change, that democratically and in solidarity paves the way for degrowth societies. In addition, it is necessary to decommodify large areas of production and consumption, i.e. to reconstruct and rebuild them as economies that are based on eco-solidarity and oriented not towards profit but towards needs and supply. They are openly regionalised, cooperative, and strongly sustainable. A profound democratisation of the economy also relies on processes of commoning through smaller, locally anchored and cooperatively organised forms of economic activity, thus enabling broad participation of people in economic activity and provision. In this way, the economy would once again be socially and politically embedded and aligned with regional needs and ideas of the common good, mutual solidarity and a good and sufficient life (Jackson/Victor 2013). The discourse on a social-ecological transformation towards degrowth societies thus goes beyond the debate on sustainable development in that it does not equate environmental, social and economic concerns, but rather emphasises the ecological and social limits of economic activity. The focus is no longer solely on technological or economic strategies to deal with multiple crises, but on a fundamental change in economic and social institutions. While this fundamental change remains an aspiration, the post-socialist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe is a concrete experience from which the transformational degrowth discourse can learn.

3. Lost in Transitions or: from the shortage economy to the degrowth economy

The economist János Kornai describes the history of the transformation in Central and Eastern Europe as unique because it has been so far “the only total transformation that took place peacefully, without violence, and at the same time astonishingly fast, in the main direction of the economic and the political changes of Western civilization” (Kornai 2006: 207). We are currently facing a new – social-ecological – transformation. Within this discourse, degrowth represents a strand that does not follow a hegemonic notion of a predetermined ‘main direction’ of human development, but rather questions this development. Nevertheless, the degrowth discourse is still strongly ‘Western’ in its search for alternatives. The experiences of transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, have hardly been considered in the degrowth discourse.

Looking at Kornai's theory of transformation, we will first complement Kornai's ideal-typical categorisation of the opposing systems of socialism (in its real Central and Eastern European implementation as state socialism) and capitalism (in its real Western European and Anglo-Saxon forms) with an equally ideal-typical description of possible degrowth societies. Whether degrowth represents an independent system is an open question, since degrowth societies do not yet exist. However, the aim of these reflections is to understand what it would mean for a social-ecological transformation to understand a post-growth society in Kornai's systematics as a system in its own right. Because of its strong focus on sufficiency strategies, the degrowth debate is often accused of leading to a shortage economy. Drawing on Kornai, we show what can be learned from shortage economies for the degrowth debate. In this context, shortage economy does not mean that people in real existing socialism constantly suffered from shortage, but that shortage is the defining logic in the economic system according to Kornai. The opportunities and challenges of the post-socialist transformation are then discussed.

3.1. Socialism, capitalism and degrowth societies

Kornai (2000) describes the two system alternatives, socialism and capitalism, in terms of three analytical features: political power, distribution of property rights and coordination mechanism. These characteristics affect the typical behaviour of economic agents (producers and consumers) and some typical economic phenomena (see Table 1). According to Kornai, the post-socialist transformation is characterised by a change in political power (from Marxist-Leninist parties to a political power promoting private property and the market economy), a redistribution of property rights (from the state to private property) and a change in the coordination mechanism (from a planned to a market economy). The change in the typical behaviour of economic actors (such as the tendency to hoard goods) as well as typical economic phenomena (such as the tendency of these economies to have shortages of goods) then follow quasi automatically due to the system change, i.e. they are the result of the transformation, but not its origin. If these considerations are taken as the basis for a social-ecological transformation, it also ought to be linked to political power, the distribution of property rights and the design of the economic coordination mechanism in order to lead to ecologically sustainable behaviour of economic actors and to ecologically positive phenomena.

A comparison of the ideal types of (state) socialism, capitalism and post-growth society along Kornai's lines reveals several key differences. In state socialism, the undivided power of the Marxist-Leninist party, the dominance of state ownership and the prevalence of bureaucratic coordination or a centrally planned economy lead to soft budget constraints, weak responsiveness to prices, plan bargaining and a quantity drive. This is the so-called principal-agent problem: the state as the principal determines the capacities of the enterprises, but it depends on the information of the agents (e.g. the general directors of the combines, the so-called *Kombinatsdirektoren* in German). However, it is in their interest to hoard labour and resources and to avoid high production targets, since they can rely on the fact that the state has no interest in the bankruptcy of the enterprises. The hoarding of labour and resources creates chronic shortages, leading to the development of a seller's market. In a seller's market, the relative power lies with the seller, which means that buyers will buy virtually anything the seller offers (Kornai 2000).

Under capitalism, political power promotes private property and the market. Private property is the dominant form of ownership and economic coordination takes place primarily through the market. This leads to a strong orientation towards the price mechanism and to hard budget constraints. Companies that cannot find buyers for their products go bankrupt in the medium term. This creates a buyer's market. Companies try to increase their output and minimise their input factors, which is why there is no chronic shortage of goods, but chronic unemployment. Over time, fierce competition leads to the emergence of large companies (Kornai 2000).

That degrowth is not simply a variation of either of these systems is also shown by the fact that its central features differ substantially from both systems. The decentralisation of political power supports the

formation of commons² (Helfrich 2014) and local coordination (Latouche 2009). Commons are the dominant form of property, and economic coordination is largely local. Commoning – the process of providing the commons – results in a primary orientation towards ecological budget constraints: among other things, the commons problem (Hardin 1968), which consists in the fact that individual utility maximisation can lead to the overuse of non-exclusive goods, is countered by local coordination (Ostrom 1990). Neither an unnecessary increase in input factors nor in output is rational for economic actors. The result is a sufficiency economy that focuses on the needs of people in their dual role as consumers and producers. A prosumer market is emerging in which consumers are also producers. Through practices such as do-it-yourself, they cover part of their needs outside of paid employment and the market, reducing paid employment time (Schor 2011). Furthermore, through local coordination and commoning, small and medium-sized enterprises become more economically rational than large enterprises (see Table 1).

Table 1: Ideal types of (state) socialism, capitalism and degrowth society

Ideal type of	Political power	Distribution of property rights	Coordination mechanism	Typical behaviour of economic actors	Typical economic phenomena
(State) Socialism	Undivided power of the Marxist-Leninist Party	Dominant position of state and quasi-state ownership	Preponderance of bureaucratic coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • soft budget constraint • weak responsiveness to prices • plan bargaining • quantity drive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chronic shortage economy • seller's market • labour shortage • unemployment on the job • intensive recurring investment • hunger of large organisations
Capitalism	Political power favours private property and the market	Dominant position of private property	Preponderance of market coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hard budget constraint • strong responsiveness to prices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no chronic shortage • buyer's market • chronic unemployment • fluctuations in the business cycle • expanding of large organisations • excessive advertisement
Post-growth society³	Decentralised political power favours commons and local coordination	Dominant position of commons	Preponderance of local coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ecological budget constraint • strong responsiveness to ecological prices • bargaining of ecological limits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sufficiency economy • prosumer market • reduction of working hours • limitation of company sizes • hardly any advertisement

Source: Based on Kornai (2000);
supplemented by the ideal type of a post-growth society according to Jorck (2018).

3.2. Abundance in the shortage economy

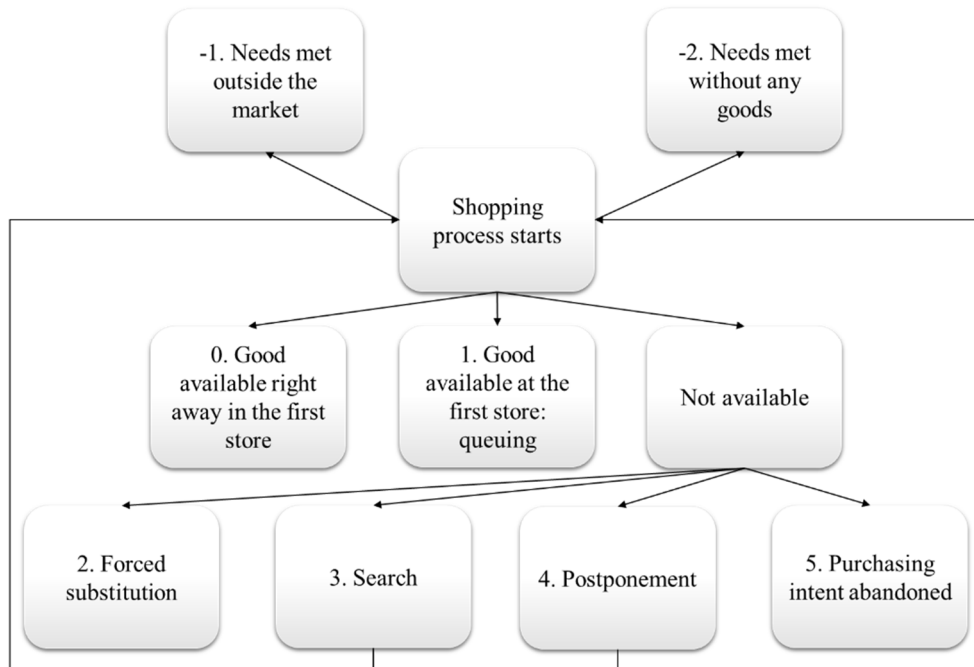
It can be seen that the basic characteristics of a system have an effect on typical economic phenomena. One such phenomenon is the economy of shortage. A central accusation against degrowth is that it would lead to such a shortage economy. However, the purchasing process in a shortage economy shows that shortage is fundamentally different from sufficiency (see Figure 1). Event 0 is the one to which capitalist economies are most accustomed: the desired product is found in the first store and the shopping process

² In economic terms, a typical distinction is made between public goods, common goods, club goods and private goods. The characteristics of a common good (rivalry, but non-exclusiveness in consumption) are attributed to the good itself. In the understanding of commons, however, these properties are the result of a social process (Helfrich 2014).

³ Kornai (2000) derives the two ideal types of (state) socialism and capitalism from the real existing systems in Central, Eastern and Western Europe. The complementary ideal type of a post-growth society, on the other hand, is based on a predominantly academic, partly activist debate. Accordingly, it is not to be equated with a third 'system'. Rather, we are interested here in the question of what conclusions would be drawn if we were to imagine the post-growth society as an ideal-type system.

is completed immediately. Events 1 to 5 are typical of a shortage economy; Kornai calls them shortage phenomena (Kornai 1992). Shoppers have to queue (1), are forced to substitute their desired good (2), continue searching (3), postpone their purchase (4) or abandon their purchase intention altogether (5). Events 3 and 4 restart the shopping process.

Figure 1: The shopping process in a shortage economy



Source: Based on Kornai (1992); own addition of events (-1) and (-2).

From a degrowth perspective, two events can be added: the buyer’s need has already been satisfied outside the market (-1), either by producing the good by oneself or within processes of commoning (keyword: subsistence); furthermore, the buyer’s needs can be satisfied without goods (-2), e.g. because no car is needed for mobility (keyword: sufficiency).

Of course, everyone has experienced one of the events 1 to 5 at least once in their life. In a shortage economy, however, these shortage phenomena occur universally, frequently, intensively and chronically (Kornai 1992: 233). An important effect of a shortage economy is the large divergence between the notional and the adjusted demand of buyers (Kornai 1992). From a degrowth perspective, this could initially be a positive aspect, were it not for the paradox of the shortage economy: although the fictitious demand of consumers – i.e. the actual need – is not satisfied, at the same time a “forced adjustment equilibrium” (Kornai 1992: 238) can lead to excessive consumption of goods that are not in demand. For example, buyers hoard goods in order to avoid possible shortages. There is still a shortage of the goods that are actually needed, but at the same time people have an abundance of goods that they do not need. A different phenomenon with a similar effect can also be observed in a surplus society: as a result of high incomes, goods are bought that exceed the fictitious demand of the consumers and have to be promoted by the producers through excessive advertising strategies. This also leads to hoarding of things that are bought but hardly used (Rosa 2015). Both shortage and abundance thus lead to ecologically unsustainable consumption and production practices.

3.3. Opportunities and risks in the transformation process

Kornai (2006) identifies five factors influencing the pace of post-socialist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe:

- (1) pre-socialist experience with the free market,
- (2) the spirit of entrepreneurship,
- (3) no strong resistance to transformation,
- (4) positive influences of the outside world (EU, IMF, OECD),
- (5) the availability of modern technology.

If these conditions are applied to the social-ecological transformation, the following five factors would be central to a rapid transformation towards degrowth:

- (1) social-ecological sufficiency and subsistence practices,
- (2) the spirit of cooperative economic activity,
- (3) strong support for the transformation among the population,
- (4) strong support of international institutions,
- (5) convivial technologies (Illich 1973).

However, the rapid change in social institutions in the post-socialist transformation was accompanied by a precarisation of everyday life: increasing inequality, unemployment (which explains the rise in labour productivity), increasing insecurity of everyday life (prices, jobs, housing, crime), spreading corruption. This led to a relatively high level of dissatisfaction with everyday life in the post-socialist transition countries (Kornai 2006). According to Kornai, this dissatisfaction can be explained by cognitive and systemic problems.

The cognitive problems arose from the high expectations at the beginning of the transformation process, the new reference points against which everyday life in ‘the West’ was measured, and the rapid collective and individual forgetting of what everyday life was like before the transformation (Kornai 2006). Such cognitive problems will also accompany the social-ecological transformation into a post-growth society if we do not question our “mental infrastructures” (Welzer 2011), many of which are geared towards growth.

Systemic problems resulted from the lower level of economic development in Central and Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe, the structural change of the production system during the transformation process, system-specific characteristics of capitalism such as unemployment and income inequality, as well as poor political decisions (Kornai 2006). Such systemic challenges are also likely to arise during a social-ecological transformation. It is therefore important to develop responses to them within the degrowth discourse.

A transformation process is always a process with aggregated uncertainty and high reversal costs. When the two coincide, people will be reluctant to engage in the process (Roland 2002). That is why a policy of compensation is so important. The transformation processes in Central and Eastern Europe can be seen as a success story at the macro level, but as a story of disappointment at the micro level. These experiences must be taken into account when thinking about a social-ecological transformation. Or as an East German member of the trade union IG Metall put it: “We already went through a transformation in 1990 and really messed it up. This time we want to do better!” (own translation, participant observation, Wolfsburg, 29.5.2021).

4. Dachas for degrowth – (post-)socialist practices for the social-ecological transformation

In order to ‘do transformation better’, we should therefore learn from the historical experiences of transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. For a successful social-ecological transformation, it will also be indispensable to tap into potentially degrowth-compatible practices ‘of the East’ and use them as inspiration ‘for the West’: many everyday practices of people in East Germany and Eastern Europe

before and after 1989/90 will be important degrowth practices. A good example is (semi-)subsistence farming. In the socialist shortage economy, cultivating one's own garden served to secure the supply of food and to increase its variety and quality. During the two world wars, private and public gardening in the so-called Victory and Liberty Gardens in Western Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA also played an important role in the population's physical and moral sustenance. In the post-war years of economic miracle and growth, however, gardening became less and less important there. To this day, the practice of (semi-)subsistence farming is spread unevenly in the countries of Eastern and Western Europe. In the Netherlands, for example, only five per cent of the population grows their own vegetables, whereas in Slovakia almost 60 per cent do so (EQLS 2003, for more recent findings see Smith and Jehlička 2013; Church et al., 2017). In Estonia, where about a third of the population still grows their own food (Stat.ee 2021), it was almost essential for survival during the difficult and unstable transition period of the 1990s. Indeed, large parts of Eastern Europe, especially Russia, were existentially dependent on these traditional skills of collective and individual self-sufficiency both during the 'shock therapy' of the early 1990s and the subsequent crises of 1998 and 2008/2009. As Kai Ehlers' book title suggests, *the* prevalent post-socialist mantra was: "We will always have potatoes" (own translation, Ehlers 2010).

This quality of the informal or "expolar" (Shanin 1990) economy of being able to support people in crisis is, above all, inverted by the Western view into the stigma of a necessity resulting from poverty and shortages. In contrast to the hip urban and community gardens of Western capitals, the (semi-)subsistence agriculture of Eastern Europe is usually perceived as a proof for backwardness that needs to be overcome by means of development policy (Abele and Frohberg, 2004). It is still seen by many as inefficient and irrational economic behaviour and as evidence of economic 'underdevelopment' (Buchowski 2006). While community gardens in Berlin celebrate their sustainability, collectivity and interculturality (Rosol 2006; 2012), the essentially comparable practice of (peri-)urban agriculture in 'the East' is, if not stigmatised and repressed, at least marginalised. Therefore, some researchers (Smith/Jehlička 2013; Jehlička et al. 2020; Ančić et al. 2019) call for the recognition of the importance of social and environmental sustainability aspects of the latter, regardless of whether the practitioners place themselves and their gardens under the corresponding sustainability slogans (hence the term 'quiet sustainability'): interpreting Eastern European food self-sufficiency as a long outdated, mere survival strategy is not only inaccurate, but also disregards the aspect of supporting more sustainable food systems. Therefore, it should be more strongly emphasised that while this practice may increase social-ecological resilience ("Dacha Resilience", Pungas 2019), it is much more than a mere survival strategy. It is also about valuable and special historical-cultural landscapes (Rodionova 2004: 72), physical and mental health (Pungas 2019; Schupp/Sharp 2012), protection of biodiversity and soil quality (Vávra et al. 2018; 2013), strong community relations and social capital, as well as knowledge and skills such as self-growing, self-processing and culinary education (Zavisca 2003).

A particularly exciting example of Eastern European (semi-)subsistence farming is Eastern Estonia. In the 1990s, the collapse of industry and various political reforms led to massive unemployment, poverty and a general lack of direction. At the same time, a large part of the population, namely the ethnic Russians, lost their citizenship and thus their social status, i.e. they were disproportionately (negatively) affected by all political-economic reforms. In this difficult period, the dacha (дача in Russian) garden provided people with invaluable support. In interviews we conducted between 2017 and 2020 with over 50 people who either grow food at their dachas themselves or are otherwise involved in this area (e.g. administratively, legislatively), almost all emphasised the aspect of "podsporije" (подспорье, help in Russian). Even today, dachas significantly enrich people's everyday lives and increase their quality of life and satisfaction. Such forms of self-sufficiency practices show clear overlaps with agro-ecological practices, which also play an essential role in degrowth. In our opinion, they can therefore be considered as a specifically Eastern European degrowth practice (see also Jehlička et al. 2010; Ančić et al. 2019; Pungas 2019).

In terms of the ecological dimension, a sufficiency-oriented lifestyle with a low ecological footprint is generally evident here (Vávra et al. 2018; Smith/Jehlička 2013; Vávra et al. 2013). Sustainable mobility (via so-called short food miles) and the thrifty use of electricity and water are usually taken for granted. Pesticides and mineral fertilisers are rarely used, while composting is an absolute standard. This form of healthy, regional and seasonal food systems through self-production deserves to be perceived and appreciated much more by the ‘West’. Even more so as young Eastern Europeans in particular are strongly oriented towards Western lifestyles. As a result, self-sufficiency is becoming less and less relevant and attractive to them.

With regard to the social dimension, the close family, friendship and neighbourly relations are worth highlighting (Pungas 2019; Ančić et al. 2019): at their dachas, everyone gathers outside in the green to literally harvest, prepare and enjoy the fruits of their own labour together. Vegetables, fruit, berries, apple juice and whatever else the garden has to offer are shared or exchanged with family and neighbours – as well as the various tasks, seeds, plants and much more. Even if the dachas are not run under the label of community gardens, they are still cooperatives in which values such as community spirit are lived out rather than the hyper-individual logic of *homo oeconomicus*.

The individual dimension plays a particularly important role for people (Zavisca 2003; McClintock 2010). Datschniki (dacha gardeners), in particular, point to today’s alienation from nature and from the products of their own labour, and grow their vegetables primarily because they “want to have their fingers in the soil” (interview material 2018-2020, cf. also Pungas 2020). They want to get out into nature, work with the soil, harvest, feel and taste the fruits of their own labour. In this way, the gardeners try to counteract the alienation and passivity of a consumer society. Instead, they perceive themselves as active, self-reliant and creative designers of their own lives and thus feel ‘alive’ (Pungas 2019, cf. also Ehlers 2010). Reducing stress and forgetting everyday worries while gardening – such psychologically and spiritually extremely valuable ‘side effects’ of gardening have almost coined a new form of therapy under the name of hortitherapy (Chillag 2018; Summers et al. 2018; Niepel 2004).

Eastern Europe offers a wide variety of self-sufficiency practices, such as gardening. However, they are still hardly noticed and eke out an existence on the margins as practices of quiet sustainability. As the supposedly ‘other’ (othering), incomplete and unfashionable, they are marginalised in hegemonic social discourses (Kuus 2004; Dirks 1992; Boatcă 2006; Todorova 1997), and in practice stigmatised and suppressed by neoliberal urban policies (Pungas 2021; cf. also Exner/Schützenberger 2018). However, they can serve as a valuable inspiration for degrowth approaches in practice and have the potential to show how ‘the good life’ is indeed widely practised in Eastern Europe. As Melissa L. Caldwell describes in her book *Dacha Idylls* (2011: 70), the dacha life is a (Russian) vision of a deeply satisfying and invigorating ‘organic life’ in which pleasure is mixed with pain and leisure is combined with meaningful work. The spiritual, the natural and the social mix in a different but socially embedded way of life that contrasts with, and critiques market capitalism and its impersonal and alienating individualism (Cohen 2013: 336). Or, as one urban architect put it in an interview, referring to Virginia Woolf’s essay of 1929, a dacha is “a room of one’s own” for the datschniki, a (recreational) place where they can affirm and live ‘the good life’ through self-effective practices.

5. “Degrowth Enthusiasm and the Eastern Blues”

In 2018, we launched the event project “Degrowth Enthusiasm and the Eastern Blues” in order to tap into such practices and bodies of knowledge as well as the diverse system and transformation experiences in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe for a successful social-ecological transformation. We wanted to engage in dialogue with people who have experience of transformation processes: in the light of their experiences, are current transformative visions à la degrowth desirable, feasible and achievable? What can the experience of transformation in Central and Eastern Europe teach us about the way forward? By the beginning of 2020, we had organised three events in very different contexts, but had to suspend further projects due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We started exploratively with a workshop at the “6th International Conference on Degrowth for Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice” in Malmö in 2018. Under the subheading “Learning from Transformation Experiences and Degrowth-related Practices in Post-socialist Countries”, we first wanted to find out from degrowth activists from different disciplines and countries – most of them academics – what attention the topic of post-socialist transformation has received so far in the degrowth discourse. Do degrowth researchers and activists consciously include transformation backgrounds and experiences in their work? In which formats and with which questions do they work, and what relevance do they ascribe to the topic in the future?

With a mixture of input and discussion rounds, we first wanted to map the field and start the dialogue. The participants in the workshop were mainly East Europeans and East Germans, the former being regularly confronted with transformation experiences and effects in their (activist) work and consciously addressing them (also in research). The East German participants shared the initial description of a relevant gap in the current transformation discourses, but less from their concrete work context than from personal, e.g. family, concerns as well as current political and social conflicts. For the few Western European (especially Northern European) participants, the background of such debates was largely uncharted territory and, after the initial aha moment, triggered a strong further interest. As a first conclusion, it seemed important to us to continue to create awareness and spaces for reflection within our transformation discourses with regard to the post-socialist transformation, and to make visible and connect the actors currently involved and interested in it.

With a workshop at the conference “Great Transformation – The Future of Modern Societies” in Jena in 2019, we then focused on East Germany. Due to the rapid and problematic institutional and systemic transfer from West Germany, the transformation in East Germany proceeded differently than in Eastern Europe. Moreover, it is perceived and evaluated differently due to the persistent ‘East-West distortions’. Under the subheading “On the Integration of East German Transformation Experiences into the Transformatory Post-growth Discourse”, we discussed in interviews and discussion rounds what we specifically need to know about the East German process of system change in order to better prepare ourselves for an aspired emancipatory transformation process in the present and the future. Together with an East German transformation researcher, we examined the state of post-socialist transformation research regarding the actors, conditions, and the course of the transition process, as well as the alternatives negotiated at the time. With an East German publisher and facilitator, who reported on their various narrative projects, we looked at people’s personal stories and experiences, many of which contrast with the official macro-level success story. We also discussed the following question: how can people in ‘the East’ and in ‘the West’ exchange their personal transformation experiences on equal footing, and how can such an exchange contribute to desirable models of a social-ecological transformation. A similar picture emerged as in Malmö: the relevance of the processes since 1989/90 was rated as highly relevant, especially in view of the current social and political conflicts, which have an impact on transformation efforts such as structural change and are likely to intensify. Here the critical perspective (What must not go wrong again?) outweighed the positive assessment (What can we build on?).

We concluded from the event and from the discussions at the sociological conference that the narrative of the East Germans’ ‘change fatigue’ is currently strongly blocking the perception of their possible transformation competences and negatively substantiating further transformation efforts. This also makes it more difficult to create narratives and practices that exist specifically in ‘the East’ and are compatible with degrowth debates.

Finally, at the beginning of 2020, we used the format of the above-mentioned publisher’s ‘storytelling salons’ to engage in a discussion with former planners of the GDR⁴ economy and its *Kombinatsdirektoren* under the subheading “Post-growth and post-socialism – What can we learn from the Post-socialist Transformation for the Social-ecological Transformation?” Many of these experts and

⁴ German Democratic Republic

practitioners of the GDR economy and its specific form of ‘corporate responsibility’ were still active in the business sector after 1990. Together, we wanted to look back at the processes of economic and business transformation and discuss possible perspectives and pitfalls for the realisation of a degrowth society. With the narrators and the other participants of the salon, we brought together older people with GDR biographies and younger people from degrowth and transformation research, which also attracted a lot of media attention. In the end, the narratives and contributions were much more about the GDR than about the transition period. Accordingly, the ideas of degrowth and transformation were measured against the ideas and developments in the GDR. They were generally welcomed, but with strong reservations about their feasibility. Open questions in this context concerned the role and changeability of mental infrastructures, for example in relation to ideas of consumption, and the forms that (socialised) property and the social coordination of ecologically and socially just supply networks would have to find. It became clear that there is a need to build understanding for each other and for the respective concerns. In this context, it is necessary to look back over a longer period of time in order to understand the reasons and experiences that lead to certain attributions and evaluations of current transformation concerns.

For the time being, we will highlight some of the thematic strands explored in these events – we will limit ourselves here to those aspects that relate to the previous sections. For example, the question of the good life, as with Kornai, was repeatedly addressed from the perspective of a shortage economy that left people’s needs for consumption and distinction unacknowledged and unsatisfied. At the same time, this narrative of shortages was constantly deconstructed. As in the example of the dacha culture, there was a strong emphasis on what actually contributes to social abundance and thus reduces individual consumption and security needs. Emphasis was on the basic social and technical infrastructure, which was experienced as a given and largely provided by the socialist enterprises, whose productivity was also measured by the extent to which they fulfilled this social responsibility. The practices of do-it-yourself, repairing, sharing, improvising, and finding creative solutions together were seen as a response to shortage, but also as a socially and ecologically effective and egalitarian practice. Sharpening the eye for a perceptible and equalising abundance that contradicts the pure description of shortage can therefore help to establish the logic of ‘enough’ as the dominant logic in the degrowth discourse, and counter reductionist debates about renunciation. This does not mean misjudging or ignoring people’s needs for consumption, distinction and status, but finding other ways and narratives to satisfy them.

The question of the coordination mechanism is certainly a neuralgic point in the degrowth debate. In contrast to Kornai’s description of the way out of a shortage economy, degrowth does not rely on more privatisation and the market for a transition to a sufficient and just society. Rather, it relies on democratic socialisation and more local coordination, for example in processes of commoning. However, not least in view of ecological budget constraints, which also have supra-regional and global effects, it is necessary to find more mixed forms of planning that address different scales and scopes of decision-making and action (Groos 2021). In this respect, there is less to be gained from centralised planning at the structural level, due to different understandings of democracy and participation, of growth and labour (productivity), and so on. But as the stories show, the experienced practical view is certainly helpful for a deeper understanding at the level of processes. For example, the strategic, political, creative, or even resistive handling of imposed budget constraints and supply quotas at different levels of planning and implementation demonstrates that room for manoeuvre and compensation, including a range of revalued subsistence practices, are indispensable to meet needs more directly and appropriately.

6. Lessons from post-socialist transformation for social-ecological transformation

The economies of Central and Eastern Europe have experienced two different economic systems and transformations. These experiences are valuable for the social-ecological transformation towards a post-growth society. The central findings of our analysis of these transformation experiences are presented here in the form of six theses. In our view, it is worthwhile to include these experiences in the degrowth debate.

I. Experience with the economy of shortage shows that low production of goods does not necessarily go hand in hand with positive environmental effects.

In an economy of shortage, there can be a forced equilibrium of adjustment with scarcity and abundance often being at odds with each other: “We had nothing [in the shops], no vegetables, no fruit, just tangerines for the New Year. And then we bought them in advance for a whole month. But imagine what happens to them when they lie around for a month. Half were rotten and had to be thrown away. [Laughs]” (Interview, Narva/Kudruküla, 2019). Accordingly, shortage can even lead directly to waste. For a degrowth economy, this means that a one-sided orientation towards ecological limits on the supply side can lead to inefficient hoarding tendencies with high environmental burdens on the demand side. A sufficiency economy must therefore consider both the supply and the demand side in order to bring about a new equilibrium of adjustment.

II. Experiences with the shortage economy must not be reduced to shortage, because this often devalues the whole body of knowledge and life practices associated with it.

Although practices such as semi-subsistence agriculture can also be seen as a way of coping with shortage and as such provide socio-economic buffers and resilience, they cannot be reduced to mere economic neediness. For this image, whether intentionally or not, leads to a renewed process of marginalisation and devaluation of the knowledge and life practices involved. It is inseparable from the hegemonic discourse of modernisation, according to which only Western standards of living are considered universally desirable. At the same time, the image reproduces the binary opposition of the ‘modern West’ and the ‘catching-up East’, thus preventing socially and ecologically desirable practices from ‘the East’ from gaining the same (global) acceptance and recognition as those from ‘the West’.

III. The distinction between the basic components of a system and its economic effects is central to understanding transformations.

The transformations in Central and Eastern Europe were successful at the macro level because they addressed the fundamental components of the systems: political power, the distribution of property rights and the coordination mechanism. The previously typical behaviour of economic actors and phenomena changed as a result of these fundamental changes. If the degrowth discourse is serious about a social-ecological transformation, and does not (mis)use the term as a synonym for ecological reform, then it is essential to examine how people in Central and Eastern Europe have *experienced* these changes and to take more account of post-socialist transformation research. In addition, there should be a greater focus on issues of political power, ownership and coordination mechanisms.

IV. Transformation does not take place “on the ruins of post-socialism”, but “with the ruins of post-socialism”.⁵

At present, many social-ecologically sustainable and vibrant practices (such as (semi-)subsistence farming in Eastern Europe) are in danger of disappearing or dying out, not only because of the generational change, but also because of hegemonic (modernisation) discourses and materialised practices of stigmatisation and displacement. However, it is a much more difficult task in a transformation to completely rebuild practices and related infrastructures than it is to value, protect, cultivate and allow existing ones to flourish. Moreover, the skills and (practical) knowledge, as well as resources such as seeds, would probably be irretrievably lost. The sufficiency and subsistence practices that still exist in many places in ‘the East’ could serve as a valuable new source of inspiration for Western degrowth advocates, and as additional examples of what other practices are possible and desirable.

⁵ Stark (1992) has coined the bon mot that the post-socialist transformation is not “on the ruins of socialism” but “with the ruins of socialism”; it thus remains shaped by pre-existing institutions and practices.

V. In the downs of transition, redistribution is a key success factor for a social-ecological transformation.

Given the short time left to make the economy climate-neutral, a social-ecological transformation will be accompanied by individual losses. Workers in the lignite, steel or car industries will not be able to simply switch to new, well-paid jobs. As the painful experiences from Central and Eastern Europe show, the struggle for compensation and redistribution during the transition is therefore of central importance. As a result of these experiences, transformation has many negative connotations there, and people are rightly suspicious of the top-down policies that used them as a testing ground for the neoliberal turn in the 1990s. Even now, the fear of history repeating itself is prevailing among many. After all, many of those who are now expected to be most willing to transform ‘again’ (for example, with regard to the phase-out of oil shale in Eastern Estonia or the coal phase-out in East German Lusatia) are at the same time those who already had to bear disproportionate costs during the transformation phase in the 1990s. In order to win them over to the social-ecological transformation, questions of social compensation, redistribution and a just transition must be at the centre of the degrowth debate. It is not only a question of compensating for the costs of the transformation, but also of creating a solid starting point for the post-transformation period.

VI. Marginal degrowth discourses in Central and Eastern Europe – Degrowth is still an elite project of ‘the West’.

In both ‘the West’ and ‘the East’, the modernisation discourse and catching-up narrative are still dominant. According to these narratives, the level of prosperity of ‘the West’ should first be achieved in ‘the East’ before further development paths (such as degrowth) can be legitimately and sovereignly considered. Degrowth itself is also a ‘Western’ term, based primarily on theories and concepts from ‘the West’ (and increasingly, thanks to decolonial approaches, also from the Global South). Nevertheless, key degrowth theorists such as Ivan Illich, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, André Gorz and Karl Polanyi come from Central and Eastern Europe. With this explicit emphasis, degrowth could also be communicated in ‘the East’ on a more equal footing. A positive side-effect would be to counteract the current Western-dominated production of knowledge. As the saying goes: either degrowth is decolonial – or it is not at all.

7. Conclusion

The post-socialist transformation has been the greatest process of upheaval in Europe in recent decades. Yet these experiences are hardly taken up in a forward-looking way. In our event series “Degrowth Enthusiasm and the Eastern Blues”, we have taken a first step towards drawing on this wealth of experience. A central insight is that a view of the post-socialist transformation alone falls short without a broader understanding of the preceding socialist transformation. After all, the special situation and the affectedness of the transformation ‘out of socialism’ resulted from the time and experiences ‘under socialism’. If the social-ecological transformation is really to represent a system change, it seems of central importance to us to deal analytically, in the tradition of comparative political economy, with the logics of different systems and system upheavals, and to take an empirical look at social practices that were appropriated in (state) socialism as well as in the post-socialist transformation.

There is also a great need for an intergenerational exchange of experience and (self-)critical discussion: why did certain developments take place in the GDR, for example? What parallels could there be for a new – social-ecological – alternative to capitalism? What are the points of reference in areas where (further) strong discrepancies are evident? Due to the pandemic, we were not able to further the discussion on aspects such as: orientation towards growth (‘catching up’ versus overcoming growth), the coordination of the economy (state-centralised versus decentralised), or the role of paid employment (prioritised versus withdrawn). However, we perceive the learning processes from developments, mistakes, and successes of (post-)socialist transformation as an important and continuous task for a successful social-ecological transformation.

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