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Towards a fair degrowth-society: Justice and the right to a ‘good life’ beyond growth

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ABSTRACT

A critical scrutiny is presented of the ethical assumptions of growth and degrowth theories with respect to distributive justice and the normative conditions for a ‘good human life’. An argument is made in favor of Sen’s and Nussbaum’s ‘capabilities approach’ as the most suitable theoretical framework for addressing these questions. Since industrialization economic growth has played a key-role as an attraction pole, around which issues of social justice, political stability, and welfare protection seemed to gravitate. Accordingly, it is considered as a necessary condition for both intragenerational and intergenerational justice. These assumptions have been subjected to substantial critique by degrowth-thinkers, according to which economic growth is rather a threat than a condition for intragenerational and intergenerational justice. However, a theoretical underpinning of these assumptions is missing so far. In the paper I analyze the ethical and moral assumptions in both approaches by focusing on the theories of justice that are implicitly laid down as a background for their arguments (welfarism, resourcism, and the capabilities-approach). In a detailed analysis of the main critical points formulated by degrowth advocates I take the capabilities approach perspective and show why it can offer a more adequate normative underpinning for the conceptualization of a degrowth society.

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1. Introduction

Advocates of growth have been repeating for years the mantra that economic growth is the best ally for distributive justice and a necessary condition for a high quality of life. On the other hand, supporters of the degrowth movement maintain that precisely because of the pervasive growth-diktat the basis of both intra-generational (among people currently living on the planet) and intergenerational justice (towards future generations) has been increasingly eroded in the last decades. Accordingly, they identify in the current crisis of our growth-oriented economies a unique chance for improving social justice and achieving a truly sustainable path with respect to future generations. As Serge Latouche puts it, a declining state is unavoidably coming upon us: ensuring that this process will lead to a more just society with a different imaginary concerning the ideal of a ‘good life’ and not to a catastrophic economic recession with fatal consequences in terms of social costs is the challenging task we are faced with now [1].

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Indeed, in the so-called Global North we are confronted with the pressing question whether growth as we know it (i.e. GDP growth) is still an achievable goal for affluent countries. Given the key role that economic growth has played for decades as an attraction pole, around which issues of social justice, political stability, and welfare protection seemed to gravitate, the rising awareness that this system might no longer work as expected at the same time begets confusion in the old schemes of thought and opens a promising field for a new, creative imaginary that might lead to alternative models for a post-growth society.

In spite of this tight link between economic growth and justice issues, the growth–degrowth debate has been so far dominated by an almost exclusive focus on specific questions concerning alternative measurement indicators for national economies or the implementation of alternative feasible models for post-growth-economies [2,3]. While on the one hand such questions are undoubtedly of crucial relevance, neglecting the ethical perspective might in the long run have fatal consequences.¹

From a philosophical point of view, as I have shown elsewhere [4,5], in the growth–degrowth debate we are confronted with four basic questions; I limit myself in this paper only to the second and the third ones:

1. Is growth as we know it possible at all under the biophysical conditions of our common planet—in other words, *can* we still grow?
2. Is growth as we know it morally justifiable or is it even morally necessary? Which issues in terms of intragenerational and intergenerational justice are we confronted with on the path towards a post-growth-society? In other words, *may* we still grow?
3. Does growth as a path of development make sense at all? Is it ethically acceptable? Is it something we might reasonably and meaningfully opt for? In other words, do we still *want to* grow? This question addresses the ethical issue about the idea of ‘a good human life’ that people have and whether in the light of practical reasoning the growth path is a desirable and wise option or not, even if it turned out that it presents no problems from a strictly moral point of view.
4. Who is ‘we’? Who has a say in the matter; that is, who is allowed to factually (and not only formally) participate in the discourse? Whose voices and whose perspectives are heard and have the chance of making a difference? This set of questions is at the same time epistemological (which scientific approach, which theories, which models are considered in the discourse?) and ethical (who is excluded?² Where are the voices of the so-called Global South and of non-human species?, etc.).

2. Frame of the discourse: justice and the good life

Both advocates of growth and of degrowth claim that their option is crucial for the sake of justice. These claims need further investigation. In the following sections I will first present the three main current theoretical approaches on distributive justice (welfarism, resourcism, and the capabilities approach). I will then briefly outline the claims for justice held by advocates of economic growth (Section 3.1). Finally, I will present the critique advanced by degrowth thinkers against such claims and subject this critique to a detailed scrutiny from the point of view of the capabilities approach (Sections 3.2–3.4).

2.1. Distributive justice: current approaches

By addressing the question of justice related to the issue of growth/degrowth we have to consider three ethical issues. First, we have to ask to whom we have duties of justice, i.e. who possesses distributive entitlements. Second, we have to ask about the ‘currency of justice’ (such as resources, welfare, or capabilities) that is adopted in order to identify which entitlements we are talking about. Third, we have to decide according to which ‘pattern of justice’ (such as equality, priority, or sufficiency) entitlements should be distributed [6].

The first question has been widely addressed with regards to future generations especially within the sustainability debate. In fact, the core of the idea of ‘Sustainability’ consists in the issue of intra- and intergenerational distributive justice and encompasses duties towards currently living generations and future generations regarding different goods [7] and types of capital, with a special focus on natural resources [8,9]. If ethical questions of intergenerational duties are discussed, it has to be justified first that duties towards future generations exist at all. Neither Parfit’s “Non-Identity-Problem” nor the argument claiming that future persons cannot have rights today are convincing [10]. Parfit’s Non-Identity-Problem obtains its moral relevance by confusing the terms individuality and personality.³ However, moral duties mainly apply to personality

¹ The newly appointed German “Enquete Commission Growth, Welfare, Quality of Life—Paths towards sustainable economy and social advancement within a social market economy” counts 17 members of the Parliament and 17 experts, among which no one stands for expertise in ethical or justice-related issues.

² The just mentioned German Commission did not appoint any woman at all among the experts although many German female scholars have been researching for years on issues related to alternative welfare models and quality of life!

³ While personality implies a normative status, individuality refers to the contingent characteristics of a single human being resulting from her unique and non-interchangeable life story [11].

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