



Analysis

Solutions to the crisis? The Green New Deal, Degrowth, and the Solidarity Economy: Alternatives to the capitalist growth economy from an ecofeminist economics perspective



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ABSTRACT

This article deals with three approaches conceived as alternative approaches to the capitalist growth economy: the Green New Deal, Degrowth, and the Solidarity Economy. Ecofeminist economics has much to offer to each of these approaches, but these contributions remain, as of yet, unrealized. The Green New Deal largely represents the green economy, which holds economic success as contingent upon the ecological restructuring of industrial production. The degrowth approach more fundamentally raises questions concerning the relationship between material prosperity and individual and social well-being. The principles of the solidarity economy involve the immediate implementation of the principles of self-determination and cooperation. None of these approaches takes into account the claims of ecofeminist economics; and none of them clearly view gender equity as essential to economic change. The three approaches are, however, deeply gendered in the sense that they are implicitly based on assumptions concerning women's labor in the sphere of social reproduction. This article demonstrates how each approach can be improved upon by the integration of ecofeminist economic principles in order to achieve economic change that also meets claims for gender equity.

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1. Introduction

Degrowth has become a dazzling term within critiques of capitalism. The concept challenges the assumption that economic growth leaves people better off and happy. The production of goods and services is supposed to improve living conditions: the ongoing growth of production and consumption is assumed to raise living standards and well-being. The ecological crisis tells us that this story of social progress through economic growth is highly questionable.

Degrowth is one possible answer to the problems created not only by the overexploitation of natural resources. Moreover, degrowth questions the way of life linked to growth by asking: What makes life and people really prosperous? Or, as Kallis et al. (2012) put it: “DG [degrowth] advocates have a different vision of prosperity, one based on dramatically less material abundance and consumption” (Kallis et al., 2012: 174). According to proponents of degrowth, the problematic aspects of the growth economy do not only stem from its negative impacts on the environment. Therefore, analysis must in greater depth consider the full range of ecological and social aspects of well-being and quality of life.

Ecofeminist economics can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the growth economy, and encourage the development of fresh perspectives on alternatives to capitalist growth. That is the aim of this article. I wish to take up the suggestion made by Kallis et al. (2012) in their introduction to *Ecological Economics* 84 on “The economics of degrowth”: “There is a clear synergy that remains to be explored between ecofeminist economics (with its emphasis on the value of non-market work, and on real human needs) and the economics of degrowth” (Kallis et al., 2012: 179). I will show how ecofeminist analysis can help to assess alternatives to the industrial mode of production and consumption and to enrich theoretical insights and policy-making processes.

Ecology and, in a broader sense, the human–nature relationship, has always been crucial for feminists. Historically, in the midst of European Enlightenment, women were excluded from rationality and subjectivity by the claim that women were closer to nature, given their capacity to create new life—just as nature does (for critiques of this see Ortner, 1974; Merchant, 1980; Sturgeon, 1997). Economically, the assumption that many of women's capacities are innate by nature, not acquired by training and acculturation, may lead to a view of women and their care work as being closer to nature (for critiques of this see Elson and Pearson, 1981; Nelson, 1997; Mellor, 1997a). Politically, women and gender issues have been marginalized through the division of the public sphere of power and the private sphere of love, i.e. two separate realms

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conceived as imbued with different norms and values (for critiques of this see [Elshtain, 1981](#); [Warren, 2000a](#); [Mallory, 2010](#)). The binary of nature/femininity and culture/masculinity embodies hierarchical relations. The hierarchy of culture and nature—nature being the “undomesticated ground” ([Alaimo, 2000](#)) from which ‘rational man’ has to emancipate himself—is foundational for the gendered construction of knowledge, politics, and economics.

Ecofeminism as a feminist political movement and as a theoretical stance focuses on the women–nature–nexus. It is a way of thinking as well as a practice which integrates ecological, economic and feminist concerns:

“Ecofeminist political economy sees a connection between the exploitation of women’s labor and the abuse of planetary resources. Women and the environment are both marginalized in their positions within the formal economy. As economists have long recognized in theory, but often not in practice, the economic system often views the environment as a ‘free’, exploitable resource while it ignores or undervalues much of women’s lives and work. Thus, the material starting point of ecofeminist analysis is the materiality of much of what the world defines as ‘women’s work’ (although it is not necessarily all done by women or by all women), a theme that is also found in much of the work of feminist economists” ([Mellor, 2005](#): 123).

Integrating ecofeminist political economy into current economic critique carries great potential for scientific analysis and for political decision making, as this article will demonstrate. In order to develop my argument, I will first describe how the ecofeminist economics approach links the ecological crisis to the crisis of social reproduction, and then sketch some basic findings of feminist economics in a broader sense, in order to develop the theoretical framework for my analysis. By “ecofeminist economics”, I am referring to a body of literature which sees a parallel between the exploitation of women’s work and the exploitation of natural resources: both are necessary prerequisites for capitalism but remain widely costless because they are considered as natural and thus free of charge. When using the term “feminist economics” I mean a wider range of feminist economic analyses comprised of various strands of thinking that share the concern of social reproduction as an important economic issue neglected by mainstream liberal economics. The second part of the article is dedicated to the presentation and discussion of three alternative approaches posited as solutions to the current economic and ecological crises, considered to be the most relevant approaches for the global North¹ when it comes to alternatives to the capitalist growth economy. I have chosen these approaches for their common concern about the scarcity and depletion of natural resources and their relevance for thinking economics differently with respect to environmental and societal issues. A further characteristic feature the three approaches have in common is the complete absence of gender awareness.

The three approaches will accordingly be analyzed in the third part by discussing each of them against the theoretical background of ecofeminist political economy. The basic premise of my argument is that feminist analysis can improve each approach; this will also advance gender equity. Thus, the fourth section combines the approaches with different strands of feminist economics. I wish to underline that feminist economic analysis does not, in conceptual nor in political terms, necessarily lead to the same conclusions—an equality framework is not the same thing as an ecofeminist framework. It is my hope that with the conclusion of the article, readers will gain a broader understanding of why it is necessary to integrate ecofeminist perspectives into ecological economics.

¹ I wish to remind the reader of the statement made by Hilikka Pietila: “We in the North are the biggest problem for the South.” ([Salleh, 2006](#)). In this way of thinking, I would like to contribute to fostering debates on how to change the global injustice lying in the over-consumption and depletion of resources by the rich and powerful societies in the global North.

1. Understanding Capitalist Crises from a Feminist Perspective

The point of departure for ecofeminist analyses of capitalist crises is the connection between the crisis of social reproduction and the crisis of society’s relationship to nature and the environment (cf. [Braidotti et al., 1994](#); [Mellor, 1997b, 2005](#); [Plumwood, 1993](#); [Shiva, 1990](#); [Warren, 1987](#); [Wichterich, 2012](#)). The linchpin of this critique is society’s appropriation and exploitation of women’s labor as if it were an infinitely available and gratuitous natural resource ([Floro, 2012](#); [Rai et al., in press](#)).

The exploitation of nature and labor in the care economy is the basis of growth in any market economy: “The type of economic growth generally pursued worldwide has not only increased the stresses put upon the earth’s resource base but also on care labor capacity, which are wrongly perceived to be of infinite supply” ([Floro, 2012](#): 15). This is the reason why ecofeminist political economy comprehends the ecological crisis and the crisis of social reproduction as two processes intrinsically entwined. [Rai et al. \(in press\)](#) use the term “depletion” not only to refer to the depletion of natural resources and of the earth’s carrying capacity, but also to the discursive, emotional, bodily, and societal harm which results from the lack of attention paid to the overburdening of women in the sphere of social reproduction: “Conceptualizing DSR [i.e. depletion through social reproduction] as harm is therefore an important device that helps to clarify issues of recognition, resource distribution and claim-making as well as identifying strategies for reversing its effects” ([Rai et al. \(in press\)](#)).

Ecological analysis defines the ecological crisis as the finiteness of natural resources. These can be raw materials such as oil, gas, uranium, rare earth elements, or mineral deposits. Although these primary inputs of industrial production are priced and traded as goods according to their scarcity, the harmful effects of their use on human beings and nature remain largely costless. That is, they are costless for a profit maximization-based economy that passes the consequences of its actions along to the environment and to human beings. Economists call this process the externalization of ecological and social costs. In addition to these non-biological resources, natural and immediately life-sustaining resources are also considered to be of vital importance. Their shortage or unjust global distribution directly influences the regenerative properties of human life, as air, water, and food are basic preconditions for vital metabolic processes. Since the beginnings of the ecological movement, the “limits to growth” ([Meadows and Meadows, 1972](#)) have been an important part of ecological research.

Ecofeminist political economy analyzes the degree to which the ecological crisis is linked to the gender order and thus exacerbates the crisis of social reproduction. Various authors describe the crisis of social reproduction as the underprovision of care for people who depend on it, as care is very time-intensive and cannot access the call for rationalization demanded by the capitalist production mode (and, due to the very nature of care work, ought not be accessible for these demands) (cf. [Folbre, 2001](#); [Jochimsen, 2003](#); [Molinier et al., 2009](#); [Razavi and Staab, 2010](#)). The crisis concerns the excessive demands on, as well as the overburdening of those who carry responsibility for social reproduction, the vast majority of whom, given the gendered division of labor, are women. Not only do women bear the responsibility for those in need of care—the additional costs ensuing from the ecological crisis are also dumped on their shoulders. This is the case, for example, when women in poor countries have to spend more time and walk longer distances in order to fetch water due to increased desertification (cf. [Harris, 2006](#); [Zwarteveen, 1997](#)). This is also the case, when, in industrialized countries, planning of large-scale transportation infrastructure neglects the everyday mobility patterns of women resulting from reproductive work (cf. [Bauhardt, 2003](#); [Hanson, 2010](#)).

Feminist economics in a broader sense shares the concern about social reproduction, linking it to the organization of labor markets, production and consumption patterns, and the unequal distribution of income and well-being. Social reproduction is the common thread in women’s work in a very global sense. Time use surveys show that

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