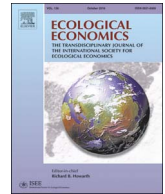




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Commentary

Post-Growth in the Global South? Some Reflections from India and Bhutan

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ABSTRACT

The critique of growth is one of the defining features of ecological economics. Yet ecological economists have had relatively little to say about “post-growth” in the global South. In this article, we propose a new definition of post-growth as the combined application and theorization of degrowth, agrowth, steady-state economics and post-development. We then discuss – with special reference to India – seven ways of thinking about post-growth in the global South. Starting with the basic observation that the current patterns of growth-fueled “development” are ecologically, socially and financially unsustainable, we argue that serious post-growth thinking can only be world-systemic and rooted in class analyses. We then point out that the “GDP growth against poverty” connection is debatable and we instead argue, normatively, that an effective post-growth program should focus on fulfilled needs and on wealth redistribution. Against the idea that growth-critical approaches have their origin in industrialized countries, we show that many post-growth ideas have non-Western roots and a substantial number of potential contemporary allies in the global South. Discussing the example of Bhutan, we suggest that preliminary elements of a post-growth program are not as utopian as it might sound.

“There could be development without growth.”

Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1975: 364)

1. Introduction

Herman Daly (1991: 149) repeatedly remarked that “the starting point in development economics should be the ‘impossibility theorem’”, namely that a Western-style high mass consumption economy for a world of 7.5 billion people is simply impossible. Any catch-up theory is out of question. We need something else, both in the global North and South. We need something that goes beyond economies centered on GDP growth.

Ecological economists have been quick to understand this and the “post-growth” research area has become one of the major contributions of ecological economics.¹ It is also a key element distinguishing (heterodox) ecological economics from (neoclassical) environmental economics. However, growth-critical approaches have remained so far quite fragmented and Western-centric, with few discussions about their applicability to the global South (but see Xue et al., 2012; Boillat et al., 2012; Hollender, 2015; Gerber and Raina, 2018). This Commentary

provides a brief overview of the debates and a new definition of post-growth. It then discusses seven ways of envisioning post-growth for the global South, with special reference to India and Bhutan.

One first measure for moving “beyond growth” in the global South and North consists in abolishing GDP and replacing it with better indicators for guiding an economy's production and consumption – we call this approach “post-GDP” (van den Bergh, 2009). This move is endorsed by many conventional economists (e.g. Stiglitz et al., 2009). A second measure, more radical but essential, consists not only in seeking better indicators but also alternatives to the current global model of Western-type growth-driven societies – we call this approach “post-growth” (Gerber and Raina, 2018). Post-growth, for us, is the combined application and theorization of the four major growth-critical currents of degrowth, agrowth, steady-state economics and post-development.

Degrowth promotes a “civilizational change” towards a society with a smaller metabolism, but more importantly, towards a society with a metabolism that has a different structure and serves new functions (D'Alisa et al., 2014). These new structure and functions are aimed at enhancing localised, democratic and equitable economies, where material accumulation is no longer a leading social value. Sharing, simplicity, conviviality, care and the commons are central features of such

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¹ In July 2010, John Gowdy, then President of the International Society for Ecological Economics, wrote that “ecological economists have [...] taken the lead in developing new theories and new policy approaches including examining the possibilities for degrowth (Martinez-Alier, Pascual, Kallis), developing biophysical economic models (Hall, Giampietro, Mayumi), and critically understanding long-run social evolution (Fischer-Kowalski). It is this body of work, I believe, that will distinguish ecological economics in the future” (Gowdy, 2010: 3).

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a society. *Agrowth*, for its part, is agnostic about growth: welfare and sustainable targets should be carefully defined and whether these targets require growth in market-based exchanges is irrelevant. Jeroen van den Bergh (2011:6) – who developed the notion – wrote that “agrowth reflects indifference [to growth] in the sense that one realizes GDP growth is perhaps good in some periods or for some countries in a certain development stage, but that ‘growth no matter what’ is not a wise aim”.²

Steady-state economics promotes non-growing societies based on a stable material and energy throughput (Daly, 1991). Herman Daly – the main proponent of this approach over the past four decades – has designed a number of steady-state policies mainly targeted at industrialized countries (Daly, 2012). Finally, *post-development* argues that the concept and practice of “development” fundamentally reflects capitalist and Western hegemony over the rest of the world and should be abandoned (Escobar, 1995; Kothari et al., 2018). We identify three main post-development orientations that are relevant to post-growth, namely (i) culturally-specific conceptions of the “good life” (e.g. *Buen Vivir*, *Ubuntu*, *Swaraj*, *Kyosei* or *Tri Hita Karana*), (ii) various forms of solidarity or community economies (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013), and (iii) post-extractivism which calls for a societal change away from economies dependent/guided by extractive industries (Gudynas, 2013).

All these four major currents of post-growth reject GDP as a useful indicator and all of them aim at enhancing human wellbeing and ecological conditions through questioning growth-addicted economies. While these currents have been sometimes seen as divergent, they can also be regarded as complementary. In this Commentary, we argue that all four are valid in specific contexts and at particular moments, both in the global South and North. But before developing this idea into more detail (Section 3) and providing a case study (Section 4), we will briefly review the debates on post-growth in the global South.

2. Brief Review of the Debates on Post-Growth in the Global South

The idea that post-growth is currently only relevant to the global North is shared by many ecological economists (e.g. Victor, 2008; Jackson, 2009). This view is already palpable in Georgescu-Roegen (1975: 378) – an early proponent of the modern notion of degrowth – and it is expressed most clearly by Daly (1991: 148):

“It is absolutely a waste of time as well as morally backward to preach steady-state doctrines to underdeveloped countries before the overdeveloped countries have taken any measure to reduce [...] the growth of their per-capita resource consumption. [...] That does not mean, however, that the underdeveloped countries can be left out of consideration. For one thing, the underdeveloped countries are not ever going to develop [...] unless the overdeveloped countries moderate their demands on world resources and absorption capacities. [...] In addition, underdeveloped countries will have to revise their expectations downward regarding their own growth”.

As we will see in the next sections, these views can be qualified. A common assumption held by many ecological economists is that income and wellbeing are linked at low income levels but that after a certain threshold they start to diverge (Layard, 2005). This important result of “happiness economics” has often been mobilized by post-growth advocates. Regrettably, however, it has also contributed to deter any exploration of post-growth ideas for the global South.

This is unfortunate because an approach to development that focuses on income growth omits many other crucial factors for wellbeing. Large-scale studies on low-income groups in developing countries are only beginning to substantiate this point. Reyes-García et al. (2016), for

example, analyzed a sample of 6973 rural low-income households in 23 developing countries and found that their overall levels of subjective wellbeing resemble levels found in other global samples with higher income. In addition, their findings suggest that income is one factor among others (e.g. relationships, autonomy, etc.) in leading to more wellbeing. Furthermore, the authors found that the association between income and wellbeing diminishes once they controlled for income comparisons – to oneself in the past (adaptation) and to others (social comparison). They even found that the effects of social comparison might be larger than the effects of absolute income. These and similar findings explain why low-income people – also in the global South – may not generally get “happier” as their societies get richer but also more unequal. Some post-growth theorists have thus criticized subjective wellbeing studies and have instead promoted a return to need-based approaches for guiding development policies (Koch et al., 2017).

In the long run, Dietz and O’Neill (2013) argued that every country should evolve towards a steady state at their maximum sustainable size. The latter can be assessed based on biophysical indicators related to the capacity of ecosystems to regenerate resources and assimilate wastes. With this in mind, every country or sector can thus be classified as experiencing “desirable growth”, “undesirable growth”, “desirable degrowth” or “undesirable degrowth”. The problem with such a roadmap, however, is that it tends to equate “degrowth” with “less material consumption” while everything else remains the same. Degrowth and post-development proponents have always emphasized the necessity to reorganize our economies in very different ways of living and thinking. Latouche (2004: 5), for example, one of the main advocates of degrowth and post-development in the French-speaking world, wrote that:

“Degrowth must apply to the South as much as to the North if there is to be any chance to stop Southern societies from rushing up the blind alley of growth economics. Where there is still time, they should aim not for development but for disentanglement – removing the obstacles that prevent them from developing differently. [...] If the South is to attempt to create non-growth societies, it must rethink and re-localise. Southern countries need to escape from their economic and cultural dependence on the North and rediscover their own histories – interrupted by colonialism, development and globalisation – to establish distinct indigenous cultural identities”.

Along the same line, the final declaration of the first degrowth international conference, held in 2008 in Paris, advocated for a combination of degrowth in the global North and post-development in the global South (see also D’Alisa et al., 2014). However, from an eco-Marxist perspective, Foster (2011: 30, his emphasis) has been reluctant to endorse such an approach:

“Lacking an adequate theory of imperialism, and failing to address the vast chasm of inequality separating the richest from the poorest nations, Latouche [...] reduces the whole immense problem of underdevelopment to one of cultural autonomy and subjection to a Westernized growth fetish. [...] It is clear that many countries in the South with very low per capita incomes cannot afford *degrowth* but could use a kind of *sustainable development*, directed at real needs such as access to water, food, health care, education, etc. This requires a radical shift in social structure away from the relations of production of capitalism/imperialism”.

These different positions on the possibility of post-growth in developing countries – mostly coming from West European or North American scholars – typically clash on their understanding of post-growth/degrowth. Moreover, the extent to which the global South needs to focus on growth in order to “develop” (or, similarly, the degree to which income is really linked to wellbeing) is an area of contention, together with the question of the compatibility of post-growth with capitalism. In the next two sections, we will discuss seven propositions and a case study – Bhutan – with the aim of enhancing coherence and clarity in these debates.

² While van den Bergh (2011) seems reluctant to endorse a radical critique of growth-based economies, it should be noted that his approach is far from apologetic about the direction and nature of current growth patterns (e.g. van den Bergh, 2009: 126).

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