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Innovation for de-growth: A case study of counter-hegemonic practices from Kerala, India

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ABSTRACT

Our research focuses on the cross-pollination of the discourses of innovation and (post)development in the Global South. We suggest that the buzzword innovation is progressively infiltrating the lexicon and situated practices of development. Within this a hegemonic framing of innovation is emerging that leverages the language of inclusion to promote connection to, and participation in, the global free market economy. This, we hypothesise is closing down a broader debate concerning the goals and roles of innovation and technology in the so called developing world. At the same time, our research suggests that this emerging hegemony is contested, presenting as alternative, minority framings with different normative underpinnings for technology and innovation that challenge the pro-growth and market-led dominant paradigm. We present the results of one of these through a qualitative in-depth case study conducted in the Indian state of Kerala. The case provides interesting insights for the degrowth community in two regards. First it shows a concrete example of an alternative framing of technology underpinned by a set of normative principles connected to those of degrowth. Second, the case shows that alternative technological paradigms based on principles aligned with those of degrowth are not only possible, but can and do co-exist with the hegemonic paradigm.

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1. Introduction

In 1953 the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee published the transcription of his Reith Lectures in the book 'The World and the West'. Reflecting on the role of technology as a transformative social agent within foreign societies he wrote:

'[...]If one abandons one's own traditional technology and adopts a foreign technology instead, the effect of this change on the technological surface of life will not remain confined to the surface, but will gradually work its way down to the depths till the whole of one's traditional culture has been undermined and the whole of the foreign culture has been given entry [...]' (Toynbee, 1953: 55).

This statement reminds us that technologies and innovation are culturally, socially and politically constructed – unintentionally, or by design (Feenberg, 1999; Pinch and Bijker, 1984; Winner, 1993). This reflection is of fundamental importance for those within the

degrowth community who ask 'what role would technology play in a degrowth society?' Toynbee's intuitions force us to reframe the question, asking instead 'what kind of society and political economy would promote 'degrowth technologies' in the first place. There might be technologies compatible with the program of degrowth, but these have to emerge from and be governed by a normative socio-political framework for techno-visionary science and innovation which privileges degrowth as a key normative anchor point and social norm (Latouche, 2009; Nierling, 2014; Owen et al., 2013).

Innovation aimed at degrowth could almost be regarded as an oxymoron. The seminal work of Georgescu-Roegen (2011) brought into sharp relief the limits of technological progress vis-à-vis the resource and ecological limits of a finite planet. Nevertheless, the faith in progress – and the growth fetishism that has accompanied it – has had at its heart the engine of apparently endless technological development, innovation, competition and creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1994). This arguably hampers rather than fosters the formulation of viable alternatives to the present growth-addicted paradigm. Western reframings of growth as 'green growth' and other cognates such as the 'circular economy' often we

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argue present technologies and innovation as a 'techno-fix'. These cognates might take into account the limits of 'planetary boundaries' but arguably neglect the social and political and insufficiently challenge, or present transformational alternatives to, innovation – based, growth economies. Many appear to echo the technological optimism, even hubris, that characterises industrial capitalism (Franceschini and Pansera, 2015). This incapacity to escape the growth paradigm is not only due to the ideological structures that underpin and lock-in industrial societies – its mental models or 'imaginary institutions' (Castoriadis, 1998) –, but also reflects the functional aspects of an economic system designed to maximise economic output, often based on resource extraction and material throughput. Technology and innovation have been at the core of this system, certainly since the industrial revolution in the West.

One interesting but as yet underexplored avenue for research is the potential for alternative world views in the Global South which have escaped, or at least resisted, this path dependency and lock-in. Of particular interest are those framings which include a degrowth normative anchoring and in which technology and innovation are in some way implicated. 'Transition discourses' in non-Western cultures (Escobar, 2015), offer rich potential in this regard. This paper explores one of these in a case study undertaken in Kerala, India. Before introducing this we set the broader scene, arguing on the basis of our previous research that innovation and technology – or rather a specific way of *framing* these – are being used as a powerful discursive tool to spread the ideology of economic, growth-based development beyond the boundaries of the West, with constitutive impacts on the ground. We argue that this process harbours a set of political and cultural assumptions and drivers that are gradually transforming, even homogenising, the immense diversity of ways of life and being in the Global South, in favour of social structures that can accommodate the ideology of the growth-based market economy. We further argue that it is doing so in an outwardly apolitical manner in which any measure of reflexivity, particularly second order (i.e. reflexivity that questions the very assumptions and norms that sit behind our current economic and social reality (Doridot et al., 2013; Lenoble and Maeschalck, 2003)) is side-lined.

Drawing particularly on the contributions of post-development scholars – e.g. (Escobar, 2015; Rist, 2011; Sachs, 2010). – we suggest that the project to develop the underdeveloped in the South is gradually shifting from a historical emphasis on 'top-down', mainly state-driven projects, to market-based initiatives led by the private sector (or private – public partnerships), which place a strong emphasis on 'innovation for the poor' and 'inclusive business models'. In this shift, technological innovation is fundamentally designed by and for the market, limiting the diversity, range, possibilities, goals, motivations for and impacts of technology. In this sense, the increasing emphasis on market – dependent innovation in the South we suggest, may serve to marginalise alternative framings of technology which, as documented in several cases (Acosta, 2010; Dagnino, 2009; Smith et al., 2014), represent a vibrant as well as variegated universe of experiments that have been traditionally opposed to the market-driven commodification of the process of technical change. Those alternatives (or *pluriverses* in Escobar's (2011) words), are a synthesis of holistic indigenous wisdom and creole cultures that share with degrowth advocates the aspiration to seek alternatives 'to progress, development, modernity, a notion that wants to recover the harmonious relation between human beings and their surroundings, between humanity and its fellows' (Thomson, 2011: 452; see also Escobar, 2015 for a recent review).

The main contributions of the paper are twofold. We firstly elaborate on the emergence of the discourse of innovation in the so called 'developing world' as one that is becoming essentially

oriented towards and driven by the market. In the Global South, this discourse derives and evolves, we argue, from what post-development scholars have called the 'tale of development' (Escobar, 2012). We show that the academic field of development economics is being 'cross-pollinated' with elements from the management and business community of scholars and practitioners, often framing poverty as a 'delivery issue' i.e. something that can be 'fixed', for example by delivering affordable products tailored to address the needs of poor consumers, or by positioning the poor as producers (e.g. of artisanal products) for the global market. Innovation, often leveraging the language of inclusion (e.g. 'inclusive business models') and self-help, becomes the vector that allows social enterprises or Multinational Corporations (MNC), to enter and engage with what is viewed as a little explored but vast potential market at the 'Bottom of Economic Pyramid' (BOP), i.e. those people living on less than US\$ 2 a day. Secondly, we contribute to the debate on 'degrowth and technology' by showing how alternative forms of framing technology in fact *co-exist*, attempting with varying degrees of success to resist this emerging dominant discourse. This helps us to explore what kind of technological arrangements are proposed and practiced by groups founded on principles which include a degrowth normative stance. Here we present the results of a qualitative case study focused on one of these, the Kerala Science Literature Movement (KSSP). The case of KSSP shows how technology can be framed as a tool for autonomy, social empowerment and political transformation through the development of a hybrid narrative (Pansera and Owen, 2015) in which economic growth is neither an imperative nor a priority. We examine KSSP then as a case example of technology for degrowth from the South, a topic that remains to date under-researched (Corazza and Victus, 2015).

2. Theoretical framework

'I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life ... Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge.' (Truman, 1964 [1949])

With these words, pronounced on January 20th 1949, the president of the United States Harry Truman inaugurated an era of aggressive economic interventions in those parts of the globe that were soon to become named as the 'developing world'. Words such as 'development' and 'economic growth' became central to the discourse of Western industrialised countries wishing to improve the lives of 'the others' (Escobar, 2012, 2010), a long term project rooted in a profound and renewed faith in progress after World War II underpinned by 'modern scientific and technical knowledge'. Truman draws a line between the prosperous nations and the rest, 'the others' living in those underdeveloped areas in which economic life is 'primitive and stagnant'. This is a state of pre-development, a sort of primitive age of obscurantism that has excluded people from the benefits of progress, wealth and democracy, a temporary condition of underdevelopment from which they can escape by embracing the western paradigm of progress and economic growth. According to one of the forefathers of degrowth, Ivan Illich, Truman's discourse simplified the complex notion of poverty, scarcity and 'basic needs' (Sachs, 2010). It had profound consequences in terms of the way non-western countries began to perceive themselves and the policies they embraced to emerge from their 'underdeveloped' condition (Escobar, 2012, 2010; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997).

A key element of Truman's speech is how he implicates science and technology, linking these with development and economic

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