



Discourses of degrowth: New value systems for global environmental governance

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abstract

The Global Environmental Politics literature tends to focus on institutional and governance frameworks as the solution to global environmental problems rather than on the systemic constraints that limit the potential effectiveness of governance efforts. Part of the problem with institutional frameworks to reform global environmental governance is insufficient attention paid to deeper structural challenges. We seek to contribute to these debates drawing on critical political ecology understood as a broad, interdisciplinary set of discourses and practices that goes to the roots of structural challenges. In particular, we focus on a broad area of research around degrowth. Usually, critical approaches are considered idealist. However, we argue that value changes are a vital component in the transition to a post-growth, post-capitalist world, which is inevitable given the biophysical and social limits to growth. While degrowth is not by any means on the verge of becoming a new dominant value system, it nevertheless presents both a coherent frame of reference as well as contains concrete examples of alternative ways of organizing society and the economy. Thus it offers important new value sets to the treasure chest of approaches wanting to bring about ecological and social change and thus a potentially important contribution to global environmental politics.

Introduction

The way the politics of global environmental degradation is studied faces an epistemological challenge with its focus on global governance as the

appropriate site for change. Governance research has been driven by the assumption that if research generates convincing evidence, shows linkages and suggests effective solutions, then that will result in normative changes as we expect actors to change their behavior in the face of the appropriate evidence (see e.g. Biermann et al., 2012). It has become clear in the past 20 years that these assumptions are flawed. Part of the reasons why this has not happened is that actors operate within systemic constraints that cannot easily be overcome even in the face of incontrovertible evidence. Thus one of the biggest challenges for researchers of global environmental politics is how to crack those systemic constraints. We define systemic constraints as the capitalist/free market economy with its engrained power relations, political institutions that are driven by interest group politics and political compromise and social norms that put wealth and the associated growth economy before well-being for people and planet. While there is of course a long history of theory and social movements seeking to transform capitalist modernity, we are looking for signs of value shifts in both institutions and wider society, and believe degrowth is worth investigating in this regard, and bringing into the discussions on global environmental politics.

The bulk of the academic literature emanating from the field of global environmental politics focuses on institutional and governance frameworks as the solution to global environmental problems rather than on the systemic constraints that limit the potential effectiveness of governance efforts (for example Young, King and Schroeder, 2008). Part of the problem with institutional frameworks to reform global environmental governance is insufficient attention paid to deeper structural challenges. While not wanting to reject reformist strategies altogether, we seek to intervene in these debates drawing on degrowth understood as a broad, interdisciplinary set of discourses and practices focused on disparate power relations that looks into the root causes and obstacles to current ecological and social unsustainability and seek a radical reorganization of society and economy. In this instance we focus on the discourse and practices that fall broadly into the area of degrowth as used in critical ecological economics and political ecology discourses. While degrowth is firmly based in the critical political economy sphere, in our opinion it offers the best insights into challenging

systemic constraints and a basis from which to approach a discussion of normative change. Degrowth is a concept that is concrete enough to be conceptualized as a policy tool and it goes to the heart of the dichotomy between environment and economy. This approach reflects our wider understanding of social change as not relying on a rigid dichotomy between reform and revolution, but rather seeing the possibility and necessity of transformation occurring in multiple avenues that may include normative changes that impact on dominant institutions as well as wider society (for example Ford and Kuetting 2017).

This paper discusses the challenges of the global environmental crisis and engages with the predominant discourse that solutions to global crises lie in successful global governance. It argues that the structural constraints hindering an effective global environmental politics are situated in the economic sphere and a commitment to a growth economy. Drawing on political ecology and degrowth discourses, suggestions for an alternative world view of global political ecology are presented.

The challenges of global environmental governance

In order to assess how well existing efforts to curb the environmental crisis are able to rise to the challenge, it is necessary to define what the challenges are. While some environmental problems seem to have been resolved or become less urgent (ozone depletion, acid rain), at face value, the challenges have become bigger, not smaller (climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, air pollution). Environmental problems are complex as well as global in that they are caused by complex global social, political, economic and cultural structures and have serious effects worldwide. Global governance institutions tend to have only limited effect in developing successful strategies because overall political compromises in negotiations between economic demands and environmental needs generally mean that proposed solutions tend not to be ecologically effective though they may function well politically (Kuetting, 2000). Where institutions are successful, they often are so because of a fortuitous constellation of events or conditions. This shows the importance of wider economic factors and thus

necessitates a political economic analysis rather than a narrow focus on institutions.

For example, the case of ozone depletion, which is often lauded as a success story, had the strategic advantage of a very small number of producers of the offending substance involved and a scientific alternative becoming available, thus facilitating a solution. Climate change, on the other hand, is too controversial, too complex and affects too many economic sectors to lend itself to a political compromise, never mind one that actually has an effect. This suggests that institutional design can only go so far as it is constrained by political, economic, scientific and environmental factors. While global governance institutions, whether private or public or a mixture of both, have been successful at forming institutions in many cases (and unsuccessful in others), this success has rarely been accompanied by measurable environmental improvement (Kuetting, 2000; Paterson, 2001). Thus it is incumbent upon scholars of global environmental politics to look beyond narrow institutional avenues of change to the wider political economy (Newell, 2008), and within this context we look to degrowth for seeds of potential change.

With the rise in importance of the international or global dimension of environmental politics, as reflected in the attention received by global environmental problems and institutions in the 1980s and early 1990s, international cooperation was considered to be the best way forward for ameliorating or resolving the issues at stake. One of the seminal texts of the early writings contextualizing global/international environmental politics poses the question in the following way:

Can a fragmented and often highly conflictual political system made up of over 170 sovereign states and numerous other actors achieve the high (and historically unprecedented) levels of co-operation and policy co-ordination needed to manage environmental problems on a global scale? (Hurrell and Kingsbury, 1992: 1).

Most of the early writings took the need for international cooperation and the state system as the starting point for cooperative policies as a given. Approaches to international environmental politics presupposed a system of

international anarchy and the need to provide a regulatory system for transboundary and global problems. The resulting grounding of the evolving new global environmental politics literature in neoliberal institutionalist thought and specifically regime theory was a logical conclusion. As a result, most environment-related international research was then centered around the notion of governance (or regimes, as early governance efforts were called then), mostly in its traditional neoliberal institutionalist form.

The global governance view of the international system is one that puts emphasis on structural diversity, but mostly continues to see national governments as the main actors and guardians of the system. This governance focus also affected global environmental policy coordination and with it came the recognition of more complex webs of interdependence and a richer diversity of actors involved in policy making (Lipschutz, 1996; Paterson et al., 2003).

Global governance is a concept used in a variety of theoretical approaches and with a variety of normative starting points. For example, the United Nations in its *UN Commission for Global Governance* report (UNCGG, 1995), *Our global neighbourhood*, claims we are entering a new era of democratization, economic transformation, multilateralism and collective responsibility. This inclusion of new groups of actors from the business and civil society spectrum found in the transnational sphere is also what the neoliberal institutionalist literature highlights as the main contribution of global governance to the understanding of international cooperation (Young, 1997; Pattberg, 2006; Young et al., 2008).

Despite the growing involvement in governance of a wide range of actors, the key decision making institutions remain inter-governmental in nature. After all, although the analysis of the international system through the lens of global governance has changed, juridically the claim to sovereignty of states has not been undermined and the political framework of the liberal global political economy has also not fundamentally changed despite the appearance that states may have lost power (Lipschutz, 2004; Kütting and Cerny, 2015).

Another dynamic that has been identified is the increased privatization of environmental governance with the growing influence of private actors which are seen as replacing the traditional role of the state (Levy and Newell, 2005; Newell and Paterson, 2010). Some writers suggest that an increasing number of private actors initiate governance institutions which then become recognized by states and become part of regulatory structures (such as ISO 14000 standards, stewardship councils) (Pattberg, 2006; Alcock, 2008; Betsill and Corell, 2008). For a liberal world view, the notion of a pluralist, inclusive global standard seems an ideal basis for harmonized global solutions. However, critics argue that it does not take account of unequal power relations between the various actors in the global political economy (Lipschutz, 2004; Kütting, 2010).

Critical scholars found that a critique of capital accumulation provides a meaningful and powerful tool through which to analyze the nature-society relations underlying the friction between environment and economy (Saurin, 1996; Kütting, 2000, 2010; Paterson, 2001; Chew, 2008). Especially the neo-Gramscian framework has proved to be useful for analyzing state-firm relations in fields such as forestry, biodiversity or climate change (Levy and Newell, 2005; Humphreys, 2018) as well as the role of civil society and an analysis of governance reproducing capitalist hegemony (Ford, 2018). As Vogler (2005: 235) puts it, 'market-based globalization is the driver of degradation and states (acting as the agents of capital) are regarded as part of the problem rather than, as in mainstream work, the solution'. The logical conclusion from this analysis is that the environmental problems regimes or global governance institutions aim to address cannot be resolved through collective action endeavors alone since these do not touch upon the underlying operation of the hegemonic economic system.

Such a fundamental critique of the liberal institutionalist emphasis on state or pluralist cooperation as the solution to environmental degradation problems can be found across many environmental sub-fields. Other ecocentric scholarship also argues that the roots of the environmental problem cannot be tackled with the development of international or global norms in a liberal market economy – such as the environmental or ecological justice literature (Hampson and Reppy, 1996; Schlosberg and

Caruthers 2010; Schlosberg, 2014), feminist critiques (Bretherton, 1998, Salleh, 2009) and political ecologists (Guha and Martínez -Alier, 1997; Peet, Robbins and Watts, 2011). Writers such as Laferriere and Stoett have imported ideas from green thought (Laferriere and Stoett, 1999; Vogler, 2018). Conca (2005), in his study on water, highlights the concept of territoriality. Jacques (2006) introduces the concept of ocean space. Others stress the importance of consumption as an economic and social activity (Ekins, Meyer and Schmidt-Bleek, 2010; Fuchs and Lorek, 2002; Dauvergne, 2008). In light of these diverse interpretations, one could argue that with the adoption of the concept of global environmental governance, literature and perspectives became more pluralized and academic debates on the concept of governance very contentious.

While most of global environmental governance is still concerned with what political science does more generally – establishing institutional frameworks to solve problems identified by political actors – writings on transnational actors from different perspectives have broadened the vision of what kinds of actors can and ought to engage in this policy process (e.g. Ford, 2018). This has certainly made political processes more diverse but it raises the question whether this makes ‘the environment’ more vulnerable to compromises and if it leads to more representative frameworks that are politically more successful but not necessarily or rarely effective ecologically.

The diversification of the global governance literature in recent years to define governance as inclusive of non-traditional actors and to include a normative desire for more representative and equitable institutions has been one way to address the above critique (Trudeau et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013; Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014; Pattberg and Widerberg, 2015). While more diverse, equitable, just, inclusive, and representative governance institutions are of course extremely desirable from a legitimacy point of view, it would be even more desirable for these new institutions to achieve more effective policies for environmental improvement as a result of increased diversity. However, that connection is tenuous at best. While more equitable institutions facilitate burden sharing both in terms of environmental and financial burdens, shared burdens do not unfortunately

equal a better environmental record. Institutions are compromises arrived at through negotiated trade-offs between actors and constrained by the power constellations underlying these trade-offs. While having more actors in the political process has solved some problems, it has not addressed the key problem – which is in the structure of the global economic system that systematically treats nature as an unlimited resource and commodity without intrinsic value or voice. Within this, it does not problematize the notion of economic growth, which is fundamentally taken for granted and embedded in a wide range of institutions, including global governance institutions (Purdey, 2010).

Critical global political ecology

Critical political ecology approaches recognize that the institutions of global governance are hampered by the structures of the contemporary global political economy within which they sit (e.g. Peet, Robbins and Watts, 2011). These approaches pay attention to the structural constraints and the relationship between nature and the political economy. Ecological economics writers such as Daly (1996) and Martínez-Alier (2002) have provided incisive critiques of the current economic/capitalist system with detailed analyzes of the root causes which have become classics of the environmental literature. Fundamentally, the incommensurability of values between a social system based on accumulation of wealth and economic efficiency with the aim of unlimited growth is incompatible with a complex and limited ecosystem. Martínez-Alier (2002) argues that the economic system is organized as if it were not located within these specific ecological constraints. However, this critique does not provide answers to questions as to what form of political organization is necessary to combine equity and sustainable environment-society relations except that it would not be based on unlimited growth or take uncritical assumptions of economic growth as its base. A growing literature on critical political economy goes beyond ecological-economic perspectives to reflect upon the political economy of ecological degradation (Kovel, 2007; Bellamy Foster, 2009). This is where a connection between governance and critical political economy is necessary.

Much of the literature is, quite rightly, focused on analyzing the problems. Indeed, a prerequisite for finding good solutions is that we truly understand the problem so of course analyzing the problems is crucial. Much less literature has focused on what the solutions might be. Part of the problem is that there are diverse discourses of what the root problems are and there is no universal agreement. These discourses have different normative origins (Dryzek, 1997; Clapp and Dauvergne, 2005). So while there is large-scale scientific consensus on the nature of the environmental crises we face, the political, economic, cultural and social dimensions underlying the environmental crises mean a lack of consensus when it comes to the solutions.

One example of a proposal for solutions was an article in *Science* by a group of global environmental politics scholars (Biermann et al., 2012). They aim to make 'realistic' suggestions, in other words suggestions that can be taken up by policy-makers and implemented and thus have some tangible results. In that respect, Biermann et al. (2012) aim to make much more applied and hands-on suggestions than conceptual work does, which offers analysis but cannot suggest avenues for transformation except suggesting that rational actors will change behavior in the face of convincing arguments. However, Biermann et al. raise two other questions, the first being what we can assume to be 'realistic'. While the proposed changes in the article are certainly feasible policy wise, many if not all the suggestions (closing regulatory gaps, according more importance to certain institutions, placing a stronger emphasis on planetary concerns in economic governance) require substantially altered power relations and value change to put the public and environmental good before private gain and it remains unrealistic that such a system can be generated for the same reasons as outlined in the critiques of the global governance literature discussed above. They are good policy suggestions but the article remains silent on how they can be effectively translated into 'realistic' actions, to quote the authors. The system-shaping agents (in the sense of decision-making and structural power) are unwilling or unable to pursue such policies. Thus this does not bring us any closer to the aim of ecological sustainability. In fact, the solutions are unrealistic

despite being technically feasible precisely because they come up against the systemic constraints outlined above.

Consequently, the key question is how to achieve environmental change when existing power relations make effective changes unlikely. This is a question that has either been ignored in the literature or answered as a policy rather than structural question (see Kütting and Cerny, 2015). It has not been identified as a research challenge although research output of the past 20 years suggests that it is a very strong element of the environmental problematique.

Thus, we argue that there is a need to accept that infinite and exponential economic growth is impossible on a finite planet. The logical follow-on is to take seriously the proposals for degrowth and redistribution. In the following section, we outline the main tenets of degrowth and highlight examples of where degrowth presents possible alternative value systems both within and outside institutions that can contribute to a broader critical understanding of global environmental politics.

Degrowth

The literature on global environmental governance and liberal institutionalism discussed above does not focus on the nature of economic organization. We argue that effective, ecological change has to go hand in hand with a decoupling from the growth economy and a move toward different forms of economic (and thereby social) organization. However, such a change will not emanate from existing power networks alone. As seen for example in the UNEP report on decoupling natural resource use from economic growth, the growth economy itself is not challenged in this decoupling discourse. The report states:

Decoupling at its simplest is reducing the amount of resources such as water or fossil fuels used to produce economic growth and delinking economic development from environmental deterioration (UNEP 2011: xi).

While attention to resource use is a vital step in the move towards a green economy, degrowth goes beyond this to question the very notion of growth,

which by necessity challenges the very logic of current accumulation strategies, necessitating a questioning of the current structuring of society and political economy.

We believe that the examples of degrowth that are in evidence today are indicators that degrowth is a possible viable strategy. Before we discuss possibilities for change, we will explore the concept of degrowth as the most promising avenue for facing the challenges of environmental degradation.

Within critical perspectives on global political ecology, the discourse of degrowth has come to prominence. The degrowth movement is both a civil society movement and an academic field that considers the downsizing of production and consumption in order to achieve a more ecologically balanced society (Victor and Rosenbluth, 2007; Latouche, 2009; Kerschner, 2010; Heinberg, 2011; Demaria, 2013; D'Alisa et al., 2015; Buch-Hansen, 2018). While by no means a homogenous research area and movement, the thrust of degrowth is critical of the inherent growth logic of the modern economic system. It arises out of the ecological economics tradition taking the starting point that the structural assumptions of an economy driven by growth rates and GDP per capita measurements is in direct contradiction to an ecosystem foundering under the demands of the growth economy. Thus, a system that operates within the ecological limits of the planet is needed, which would logically necessitate a move away from the ideological underpinnings of mainstream economic thought that growth is infinite (Booth, 2004; Barry, 2012; Cato, 2013; Daly, 2014) and thus ultimately necessitate the transformation of the capitalist mode of production, consumption and reproduction (Demaria et al., 2013; D'Alisa et al., 2015). This is of course where power and systemic constraints come in, as outlined earlier in this paper.

Kallis et al. (2012) outline the following indicators as guiding principles for a degrowth society: cap and share, zero interest rates, non-debt money and regional currencies, new forms of property and work-sharing. Substantively, their approach aims to take the profit motive out of most of the economy and thus to reduce the growth potential (and increase more equitable social relations). In fact, Victor and Rosenbluth (2007: 492) argue that in modern

industrial societies economic growth ‘detracts more from well-being than it adds’. In the same vein, the 2015 winner of *Riksbank Prize* in Economic Sciences, Angus Deaton, highlights that more wealth does not result in more happiness or wellbeing beyond a certain (quite low) point – you certainly do not have to be part of the top 1% or even top 30% to feel more happiness. Victor and Rosenbluth state that environmental and resource constraints make continued economic growth an unrealistic option, that economic growth is not really necessary for developed countries to sustain their welfare and that economic growth’s side effects ultimately outweigh its supposed benefits. This argument is mirrored forcefully by researchers critical of growth in general (Jackson, 2009). Poverty and uneven distribution are a manifestation of this argument (Zieschank and Dieffenbacher, 2012). However, while smaller economies would be a consequence of degrowth transformation, indeed a differentiation is made between various areas of economic activity. While clearly some industries need to shrink, such as extraction and consumption of fossil fuels or the financial sector, sectors such as education, health and social care, as well as renewable energy might see an expansion (D’Alisa et al., 2015). Likewise, across the globe degrowth ought not to be applied evenly. Economic expansion to meet vital human needs and alleviate poverty in the global South are still acknowledged as necessary, all the while bloated Northern economies clearly need to shrink, while also paying attention to inequality, injustices and poverty in the North (Demaria et al., 2013), similar to the earlier proposals around contraction and convergence in the field of fossil fuel consumption (Meyer, 2000).

The basic premise of a degrowth society is a commitment to transformation towards a system that does not prioritize economic growth as its defining feature and also produces more equitable social relations. This would require a radical rethinking and reorganization of political and economic practices running counter to the main tenets of the free market capitalist economy. There are many nuances to the degrowth literature that we will not go into detail here as the main objective of our article is to discuss how the general notion of degrowth has provided evidence of practical alternatives that begin to challenge dominant value sets.

A commitment to degrowth would run counter to all political networks, alliances, systems, governance structures that are currently in existence and that are based on a growth logic (Purdey, 2010). Hence the political support it would receive is non-existent if suggested as a policy direction. However, we see recent examples that point in the direction of ideas around degrowth influencing policy discourse. For example, the ‘German Energiewende’ (energy transformation) shows that power networks (though not necessarily structural constraints) can be cracked under the right circumstances and that policy tools based on reducing material throughput (which ultimately is the main guiding scientific principle of a degrowth society) are beginning to be policy tools at local, national and indeed global levels. Such cracking of systemic constraints can be explained with transnational neopluralism which argues that change is possible when the right political interests align and are able to change power relations (Kütting and Cerny, 2015). However, the emphasis is on the ‘right circumstances’, which is not something that can be controlled with agency.

Buch-Hansen (2018) provides an important analysis of what the criteria for a paradigm shift towards degrowth might be, deploying critical political economic analysis. He argues that there are four requirements for such a shift to take place: the necessity of a crisis, the presence of an alternative political project that could become hegemonic, a comprehensive coalition of social forces sympathetic to this new political project, including amongst elites and elite institutions and finally consent, even if only passive, amongst society. That a crisis, or even convergence of crises, exists is widely understood. He also makes a good case for seeing degrowth as offering the potential of an alternative political project albeit marginal at present. However, what is lacking at present is supportive social forces and wider consent.

We agree with this analysis and, as mentioned above, this ties in with a long history of the study of social change. However, we want to argue that a convergence of wider societal forces – for example green movements and anti-austerity movements – are beginning to make inroads into value shifts within wider society (see also D’Alisa et al., 2015) and we are also seeing some minor shifts in global institutions, which are worth noting.

Interestingly, the language related to critical political ecology and degrowth has found its way into the discourse of multilateral institutions. For example, the OECD has a program dedicated to measuring material flows and research productivity which engages with the importance of measuring material throughput. Material flow analysis (MFA) is accepted as an increasingly policy relevant and rapidly developing field of research, constituting a tool that can provide a more integrated and holistic measure of resource and material flows in the economy, from which economy-wide material flow indicators can be derived, including on resource productivity and resource use efficiency. The OECD acknowledges that these could parallel labour productivity indicators (OECD, 2008; see also OECD 2011).

The World Bank, too, sees the limitations of a growth paradigm and argues for material throughputs to take a central place in economic reasoning. Like Victor and Rosenbluth (2007), the World Bank noted that economic growth and wellbeing are not intrinsically connected:

[P]reliminary estimates show that many of the most resource-dependent countries, including all the major oil exporters, have low or negative genuine domestic savings. That means that losses of their national wealth caused by depletion of natural capital and damage done by CO₂ emissions outweigh the benefits from net domestic saving and education expenditure. Thus it is quite possible that in these countries the aggregate national wealth was actually decreasing, to the detriment of the people's quality of life and these countries' future development prospects. And such unsustainable development might be happening in spite of positive economic growth indicators, which are usually at the center of all governments' attention. (World Bank, 2004: 115)

Thus, the recognition of degrowth, or at least a critical engagement with the concept of growth, is not a debate that takes place solely on the academic left, but has also squarely arrived in policy-making centers. However, it needs to be explored what the consequences of this boundary-crossing dialogue are given that this discourse takes place without reference to the underlying power structures that are ultimately responsible for degrading nature-society relations in the first place. So for example in the case of the World Bank, while it is laudable to see an acknowledgment of underlying material throughputs and related impacts on well-being, they are arguably

still couched in terms of sustainable development, which does not radically challenge the underlying logic of capitalism (Brand, 2012) and thus is not in line with more radical degrowth arguments. However, they are a sign of changing discourse within dominant institutions, even if they are not signifiers of radical social change. There is still a gap between optimistic but ineffective global environmental governance literature on the one hand and critical, deeply analytical but perhaps ‘unrealistic’ political ecology and degrowth literature on the other. This is for several reasons – firstly, a basic incommensurability of values between the status quo politico-economic system and those discourses that seek to take seriously the biophysical and social limitations that make the status-quo untenable. Secondly, there is a lack of consensus between the main political and economic actors in decision-making roles and knowledge holders researching environmental degradation and/or climate change. Finally, there are major difficulties in effecting large-scale change given the power constraints arising out of points one and two above, that are linked to entrenched dominant economic and political enclosures.

As noted earlier in a different context, the incommensurability of values between a social system based on accumulation of wealth, economic efficiency and unlimited growth is incompatible with a complex ecosystem. Martínez-Alier (2002), in particular, argues that the economic system is organized as if it was not located within these specific ecological constraints. It is not in ‘the system’s interest’ to acknowledge its shortcomings as the system is exactly predestined to operate as a power and interest-maximizing unit. While research generated at all levels has shown quite conclusively that the closed system economy operates as if indefinite growth were feasible and desirable, all ecological research shows that a finite planet and ecosystem cannot logically be based on infinite growth. Even if renewable energy as the main energy source became a reality, global society would still bump up against finite material bases. Thus the values of the politico-economic system are fundamentally incompatible with the kind of supply system that would be sustainable. However, given the self-propelling nature of the power constellations of the economic system, a fundamental change of

existing practices would not be in the interest of decision-making elites because it would undermine the basis of their power.

Environmental problems, as argued above, therefore cannot be resolved through governance-type collective actions alone since these do not touch upon the underlying operation of prevailing political-economic processes – and, indeed, they tend to reinforce those processes. They further institutionally embed not merely capitalism as a mode of production but also a range of other underlying structures of unequal power and control in both domestic and global politics – structures which directly or indirectly depend upon environmental degradation for maintaining their power and control as well as their profitability, such as fossil fuel producers.

Road to change

There are certain trends in global environmental politics that show that these constraints can be overcome in small ways which may hold lessons for larger scale structural change. Our aim is to shift the academic debate in this direction.

Lessons or blueprints for ecological change can be found at the margins of society rather than in the mainstream governance forms. For example, Litfin (2014), Fischer (2017) and Henfrey and Ford (2018) all argue that the ecovillage movement is an excellent example of a form of organization that is a lived form of a degrowth and ecologically conscious society. Often dismissed as of no importance, the ecovillage movement is nevertheless a sizeable movement, especially in the developing world.

Likewise, the concept of ‘buen vivir’ in Latin America and the increasing empowerment of indigenous communities is another example of alternative, degrowth-driven societies becoming legitimized and empowered actors in the global community and aiming to stake their claims (Acosta, 2017). Again, these are movements that are often regarded as marginal because of their challenging the status quo of a global economy, however, the fact that these communities are increasingly getting recognized and legitimized as actors shows a potential for a paradigm shift (Suiseeya, 2014).

In the global North (as well as South), movements for healthier, more sustainable and ethical agriculture and the rising movements against the use of plastic are examples of society questioning the growth model of food production. While still a small proportion of the overall food economy, the existence of ‘no plastics supermarkets’, for example, are a sign that challenges to the growth economy are everywhere and are likely to rise. These are sites of resistance to the growth economy and while they are fairly small at the moment, they are nevertheless hopeful sites for changes that have the potential to challenge the hegemony of economic growth. In all, we take note of challenges to the growth discourse within international institutions such as the OECD and the World Bank, as well as amongst wider social forces across the globe. These are still marginal, and diverse and legitimate questions can be asked about scaling up beyond dispersed and diverse movements. Nevertheless we see these as signs that values are shifting in wider society and that these shifts are making themselves felt even within the corridors of inter-governmental institutions, even if underlying political-economic structures will most likely be much slower to shift.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that conventional approaches to ‘solving’ the global environmental crisis have sought to build global institutions for sustainable development and environment that have remained coopted into orthodox hegemonic economic and political thinking. A critical political ecology approach seeks to look at the deeper structures and obstacles to why global environmental governance is not containing or solving the ecological challenges that we face. Our approach has been to focus on attempts that seek to transform current structures and practices. In doing so, we have identified a focus on degrowth within critical political ecology as the most vital approach toward overcoming the ecological crisis. Yet, global governance and critical political ecology/degrowth are two discourses that hardly overlap or interact. Our article is a first step and first stab at identifying possible overlaps/crossroads, identifying promising

developments and highlighting the challenges and constraints associated with this process.

While an emphasis on global governance acknowledges the constraints arising out of bringing the interests of predominant actors to a negotiated compromise and focuses on consensus-building, the urgency of the environmental crisis is very much not in sync with the solutions proposed by this focus. It does not address the primacy of the economic system and its emphasis on growth and without doing so, is unlikely to offer the kind of solutions that are ecologically necessary. This is why an emphasis on degrowth is so vitally important. As discussed in this paper, the basic premise of a degrowth system is that it does not prioritize economic growth as the defining feature of the system and also produces more equitable social relations. While a degrowth society is unlikely to ever arise out of global governance policies, there are many examples of practiced degrowth strategies at the community level that have been successful and can serve as inspiration for any attempt to move toward degrowth. This paper is an attempt to show these connections and call for more academic focus on the potential role of degrowth strategies as a transformative political force.

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