

We should continue this dialogue with the EU institutions

An interview with Prof Dr Tom Bauler, conducted by Christian Schulz

Tom Bauler is Chair of Environment and Economy at Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). In his research on socio-ecological transition he focuses, among other things, on questions of environmental governance, alternative indicators of social welfare and social innovations. In 2018 he was the academic partner and co-organisier of the Post-Growth Conference at the European Parliament.¹ <http://igeat.ulb.ac.be/fr/equipe/details/person/tom-bauler/>

How did it come about that the Post-Growth Conference in 2018 was hosted by the European Parliament?

Tom Bauler: There are different layers of explanation as to why we were involved in this. A very personal one is that it was an initial initiative by a Member of Parliament, a Belgian politician called Phillipe Lamberts, who is in 'Ecolo', so part of the Group of the Greens in the European Parliament. I know him a little bit, his parliamentary assistant was a former student of mine and he wrote his Master's thesis under my coordination on material flows in Wallonia and how to re-configure these material flows under a degrowth programme, what would happen with these material flows once you accept that there is some form of degrowth. And Phillipe actually was invited to one of the International Degrowth Conferences, I think it was the one in Budapest.

¹ <https://www.degrowth.info/en/2018/09/impressions-from-the-post-growth-conference-at-the-european-parliament-in-brussels/> (28.02.2020)

The people around Vincent Liégey and Federico Demaria – involved in the ‘degrowth&science network’ – started to initiate a reflection on how to create a more formal science-policy interface – a degrowth science, degrowth movements, degrowth activism, policy democracy sort of interface. Their first move was to set up a roundtable session on ‘degrowth in parliaments’ at this conference. They were looking for keynote participants for the roundtable, and the idea emerged that Phillipe was the MEP to invite. He’s a bit atypical as a member of the Green Party, at least for Belgium, because he engages very much with industry and more generally economic activities. As a consequence, he sits also on the more ‘hardcore’ commissions of the European Parliament, so not the environment or energy, but the industry and the trades and that sort of stuff. He has a very precise idea on what degrowth means for him.

So, it started with that roundtable session and then Phillipe came back from Budapest with quite some enthusiasm, with the consequence that then Olivier came to me in order to request some local academic support for a Brussels EP-conference on de-/post-growth. Olivier reached out to other parties, so there were people from the socialists, from here and there, and they formed a coalition actually, a cross-party group. Phillipe also financed a study on macro-economic modelling exercises, what would it mean, a degrowth trajectory for Europe, in terms of macroeconomic effects. They gave that to colleagues in Barcelona and Italy. When Philippe had that report on his table, Olivier came back to me with more concrete plans. The call came thus actually from two sides, both the degrowth people around Vincent Liégey and Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis, and this working group at the European Parliament, and a little bit in between that, ourselves, the local academic partner, and the European Environmental Bureau, which is a federation of environmental NGOs, a lobbying group. We all came together and thought we need to do something and then after a couple of discussions it became quite quickly clear that we had to try to see how far we could enter into a dialogue with the hardcore chief economists of the different European institutions.

So, the event was finally hosted by the Parliament, in their premises?

Tom Bauler: There is a very obvious aspect to this choice. If you want to do something in the European Parliament, you can either be hosted by a Mem-

ber of Parliament (MEP) or by a group of MEPs. If it's a trans-party group, it achieves more importance in the Parliament itself, you get more attention, and obviously also bigger funding. At one point the leverage was sufficient for Phillipe to try to get the president of the European Parliament (EP) on board. As a consequence, the entire initiative formally became an initiative by the entire Parliament and not just of a bunch of specific MEPs. The line of reasoning was that in 2007 and 2009/10 the EP had organised a series of 'Beyond GDP' conferences, and the present initiative could be linked to that line of debate, ten years later. They understood that that sort of heterodox thinking had already gained access once to the Parliament, and with quite some success as people still speak of it as if the Parliament had had a lead role in that international discussion around the renewal of indicators. So the EP saw a chance to do something like this again, with a post-growth agenda this time.

Was it a one-off event? Or did something happen afterwards in terms of perpetuating this dialogue?

Tom Bauler: Well, the dialogue between the European Parliament and degrowth academia and degrowth movements goes on, in both ways. That relatively loose working group has been extended a little bit at the level of the European Parliament, which has also had to digest the latest elections and the debate around the new Commission. The next move – at the level of the degrowth community – is to organise something at the 'International Degrowth & Ecological Economics Conference' in Manchester this year (2020). So that dynamic goes on.

At the end of the 2018 conference, we had indeed in mind – because we all found the initiative quite productive – that we would continue some of the encounters with the EU officials. The plan was to let the European elections pass, to wait for the new Parliament and the new European Commission, and to then redo a bigger event in Brussels. So if everything goes right we will have a bigger initiative in Brussels again at the level of the institutions. In parallel, meanwhile there is a sort of formalisation of the dialogue, as there have been a series of closed-door events in Brussels. Actually, the call came from the more central orthodox economists at the level of the institutions – to have closed-door events, to discuss more technical issues such as social protection on a degrowth agenda.

In your everyday work as a university teacher and researcher, to what extent can you include degrowth approaches?

Tom Bauler: It is marginal, I would say in my research work, I don't have proper projects that I would say are really on degrowth. I had some activities in the past on alternative economic indicators, which some people say is part of the degrowth agenda, but maybe not. I did something on social innovation. Some of these social innovation issues are also part of a degrowth scenario because of their disruptive nature. Broadly I would say, I don't have a research agenda which focuses on degrowth.

But teaching is very different. My main teaching activities are related to ecological economics, so I teach a form of heterodox economics where macroeconomic issues become very prominent. As a consequence, I quite strongly question growth trajectories being an avenue to bring us to being able to respect climate objectives and adjacent environmental objectives like that. For instance, in my main course I have a whole chapter on degrowth, macroeconomics, macro-ecological economics, which is basically degrowth economics. I also teach a course on environmental consumption and psychology, where I also teach things like frugality and sufficiency which could be seen as being part of a degrowth agenda. The teaching embodies actually quite a lot of links to this literature and its whole mindset.

How do you deal with the fact that most of the textbooks in your field are still rather orthodox?

Tom Bauler: I have a regular textbook which is on environmental economics, I tell my students that that is the technical part of the story, if you want to understand what a market is or what a price is, those sort of technicalities, they should go to that textbook. And then for each chapter, so to speak, for each topic, I have identified a set of more focal readings, which are not textbooks anymore, because textbooks don't exist in all of these fields, it's more a set of papers.

In your research on social innovation, do you face any particular methodological challenges related to the degrowth approach?

Tom Bauler: Yes, I think the biggest challenges are on the methodological side. At the moment we struggle with the fact that all these objects of studies are entangled in very intense dynamics and are changing more rapidly than you can get the data on them. 'Social innovation in the making' is really very challenging in terms of stabilising your object of research and your unit of analysis. It's one of the classical things: it's not so difficult to characterise them, to stay with them one or two years, but to stabilise the object in order to really understand what is happening is really a challenge.

Another challenge that is a little bit more traditional is that there is quite a high demand from a lot of these 'objects' to actually use transdisciplinary or co-creation approaches. For a lot of obvious reasons and for a lot of good reasons, but that methodological avenue is tending to monopolise the method choice a little bit, it's starting to become like a hegemony of method. If you want to study social innovation, you almost are supposed to do it in a co-creational way. I can understand that call in particular, but it gets quite monolithic. I don't like that particularly, I'd prefer more variety, especially when it comes to some of the funding. For Brussels' regional funding for instance, if you want to do research on social innovation, it almost for sure has to be in a co-creational mode. Simultaneously, students, but also PhD candidates or postdocs tend more and more to favour transdisciplinary or co-creation processes. Which is very interesting as such, but it should not be only that.

If you were given an unconditional degrowth research grant allowing you to hire a postdoc for two years, what would be the topical focus of your project?

Tom Bauler: There are two answers to that, the first one is more linked to the current state of affairs in policy design, maybe the transition agenda or something like that. The topic would be defined by a lack of work on the governance of 'exnovation', i. e. trying to understand how to make policies to help society to do the opposite of innovation. Phase out specific socio-technical systems in particular socio-economic sectors. That is one research agenda which is interesting me right now very much; but it would not be a lifetime project. The thing that troubles me at the moment is that I get the impression very selfishly within academia, there is a long way to go to bring us away from the current, present 'bizarreries' which configure our institutions and our activities. In particular the configuration around 'fast science' (fast publications, fast projects, fast solutions ...) which I really find increas-

ingly difficult. I'm not saying everything is bad in the present science business, but I have more and more the impression that academia is a little bit like a headless chicken at the moment, in terms of how my professional life is organised and the activities and lives of those around me.

It's a rich struggle in how to teach, how to research, how to do science actually. What if your projects followed a sort of a degrowth agenda on doing science? That could be very interesting. So one avenue could be to develop some research in a prospective mode on how to understand the future of science, that would be really interesting I guess.

Another thing we are facing over here in Brussels which I am trying to get my head around is to capture the memories of our European institutions. If I look at the very very senior civil servants in the European institutions, I'm surprised by the level of capacity for controversial debates these people have. They are not the typical managers of policy implementation or so; most of them really also see themselves as forging the future of (parts of) humanity; and they come up with deep classical traditional philosophical struggles. Some of them are very conscious about ecological issues, and really pay attention to their own intellectual development because what they are doing is not just implementing policies, designing policies; it's much more important. Being so close to the European institutions really helps to make these observations. A second avenue for future research could be to try to better capture the debates and struggles of ideas which are present in the institutions.