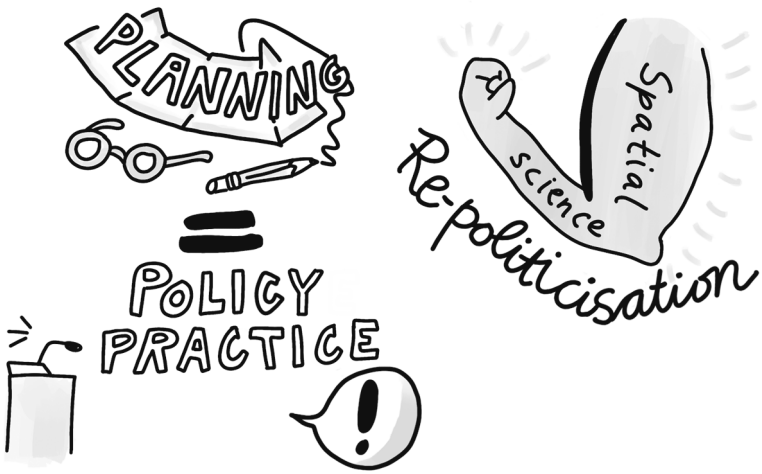
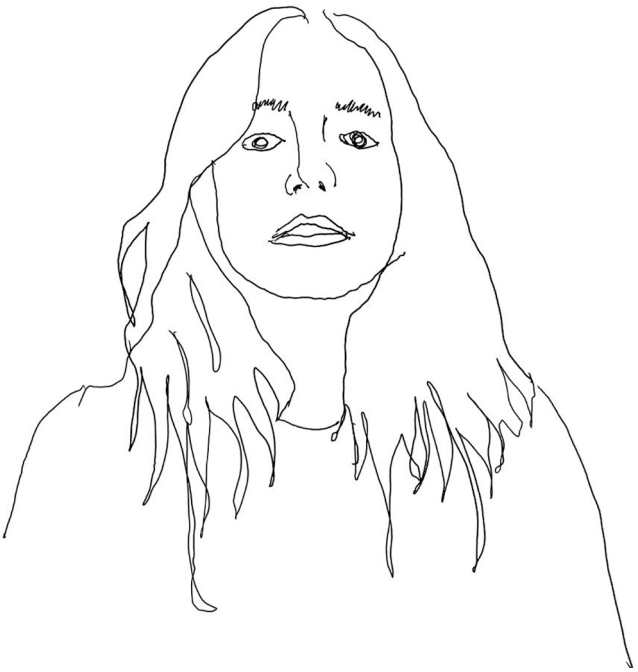
III. Spaces of Conflict



'The need [for post-growth] arises from sustainability issues, social injustice and international interactions which growth logics fail to acknowledge, define as problematic or view as necessary.'

Kim C. von Schönfeld



Provincialising degrowth
Alternatives to development and the Global South

Antje Bruns

1. Introduction

The exploitation of people, raw materials and nature is leading to an intensification of socio-ecological crises on a planetary scale, with links between environmental change and inequality becoming increasingly clearly defined. At the same time, these links reveal the international division of labour. The Global North consumes, produces and emits. The environmental risks and impacts are externalised – especially at the expense of societies in the Global South.[1] A fundamental transformation of the resource-intensive patterns of production and consumption in the Global North is thus necessary in order to make a socially and environmentally just life possible for everyone, including those in the Global South. Degrowth is a transformative approach that calls for fundamental changes to the economic and social model in the Global North (Brand/Krams 2018). It draws on a tradition of thought that reaches back to the concept of 'décroissance', which should be read as a criticism of the hegemonial idea of development. Development, as a Western invention, is indivisibly connected to economic growth and builds upon inequalities between North and South (Latouche 2006).

1 Global North and Global South are not geographical concepts although the majority of the rich human population live in the northern hemisphere and a large share of the poor population live in countries in the south. 'North' and 'South' are rather metaphors for the social, economic and ecological inequality which is caused by capitalism and colonialism on a global scale.

Degrowth focuses on the need for transformation in the Global North. This highly necessary search for alternatives must not lose sight of the global interactions and long-distance impacts of 'our' transformation. The socio-ecological systems in the North and South are so closely interconnected that socio-ecological transformation processes in the Global North can reproduce new geographies of inequality in the Global South. Precisely because we are trying to achieve a good life for all, it is important to bear these relational patterns in mind, as we are primarily the ones who are living 'not beyond our means but beyond the means of others' – as Stephan Lessenich expresses it, referring to global socio-ecological inequalities and non-contemporaneity (Lessenich 2018: 203, translated from German). These inequalities, with winners and the privileged on the one hand and losers and the marginalised on the other hand, are deeply inscribed in (neo-)colonial and capitalist economic and social systems (Latouche 2006). The historical roots reach far back, dividing the world into colonised and colonisers. In the world order thus created, the project of European Modernity became hegemonic (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000), which is why any search for alternatives to the capitalist system must tackle its dark side – colonialism. Historical amnesia would disregard the lines connecting the colonially established system of resource exploitation to the Eurocentric world order and knowledge system.

Despite the critical voices heard from sustainability and transformation studies, ways of thinking and approaches from the Global South seldom influence theory building, the development of concepts or policy strategies. Elsewhere, attention has been drawn to gaps in the fields of climate policy (Bauriedl 2015) and urban development (Bruns/Gerend 2018). It is thus right to ask who actually speaks for the future of the Earth (Lövbrand/Beck/Chilvers et al. 2015) and who is absent or rendered absent from this discourse (Escobar 2016). The marginalisation of voices constrains discourses and is associated with a dominance and standardisation of knowledge – a process that has been described as epistemic violence (Spivak 1988). Often epistemic violence takes the form of subtle concealment, as is the case, for instance, when we speak of a global world society. This supposedly integrative planetary perspective conceals unequal relations, disguising discrepancies between this representation and the agency of those people who have scarcely contributed to the socio-ecological crisis but are particularly affected by it.

In this article, inequalities between North and South and their historical development are used as an analytical lens through which to focus on different settings and narrative strands of the socio-ecological crisis and transformation discourse. This highlights colonial continuities in the discourse of the Anthropocene and further emphasises that decolonial options must be included in the degrowth debate. The narrative adopted by earth system sciences targets the planetary scale and draws a veil of ignorance over the geographies of inequality. In contrast, it is precisely the inequality caused by colonial practices and mentalities that is the focus and starting point of theories and approaches from the Global South. As epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2011), such approaches offer decolonial alternatives to Eurocentric thinking, knowledge and action and are therefore – and this is the central argument of the article – indispensable for the degrowth debate.

The involvement of epistemologies from the South (Escobar 2016) is necessarily a reflexive process that is associated with a calling into question of Western knowledge production and orders. It enables the recognition and acceptance of critical and alternative ways of thinking from the South – such as post-development and environmental justice – acknowledging them as productive questioning of Western theories. In this way it becomes possible to decentralise and provincialise the Eurocentric perspective on the socio-ecological crisis in the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty 2008).

2. The socio-ecological crisis in the Anthropocene...

Discussion about the necessity of transformation is – especially in the German-language spatial sciences debate – strongly linked to the Anthropocene discourse. This implies that colonial continuities are produced or revealed, as is demonstrated below. There is namely no single narrative about the Anthropocene. It is rather the case that there are different understandings about what characterises the crisis in the Anthropocene and which imperatives of action should be derived.

3. … from the perspective of earth system sciences

This reading of the Anthropocene suggests that human beings influence processes relevant to the earth system on a global scale, and that this development accelerated with industrialisation and the associated growth in the use of fossil fuels (Steffen/Crutzen/McNeill 2007). Urbanisation and globalisation have contributed to the 'great acceleration', culminating in the geological era known as the Anthropocene. Geological eras are commonly determined by the discipline of geology which uses a 'golden spike' in sediments and rocks to declare a new stratigraphical era.

The characteristics and also the drivers of planetary transformation are the extensive and widespread exploitation, sealing and degradation of land and natural ecosystems and the emissions caused by the use of fossil fuels. These processes, which indicate the interwovenness of social and natural processes, result in global climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the accumulation of plastic in water bodies, soil and animals (Zalasiewicz/Williams/Smith et al. 2008). The speed and dimensions of this transformation are so great that there is increasing evidence of exceeding the tipping point and crossing planetary limits (Steffen/Richardson/Rockström et al. 2020). It is assumed that within certain social and biophysical boundaries, the earth's system is dynamic and variable and can deliver central functions. If, on the other hand, tipping points are exceeded, then the socio-ecological system behaves non-linearly and is beyond regulation. To prevent the socio-ecological collapse of the earth's system, there is a need for political intervention. On the international scale, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are viewed as a promising instrument. They are now also implemented on national and subnational levels to promote and support a sustainable and just future by combining state action, economic measures and civil society activities. Although the SDGs are not legally binding, the resonant optimism about governance that they embody can hardly be ignored. In this ideal, global sustainability and justice are negotiated as feasibility issues to be tackled by techno-managerial governance. The combating of poverty continues to be linked to economic growth, with an emphasis on the role of private business (BMZ 2016). There is still an assumption that technological solutions and economic modernisation in the context of a 'policy of controls' can suffice (Adloff/Neckel 2019, translated from German). However, this model of

transformation does not focus on reducing structural, political or economic inequality as part of a profound change of path.

Furthermore, this narrative of planetary transformation in the Anthropocene is problematic due to its 'universalised interpretations of causes' (Bauriedl 2015: 16, translated from German). These interpretations conceal the fact that not all people are equally responsible for the increased energy consumption or ecological footprints related, for instance, to tourism, but rather just the few who have the necessary socio-economic status and passports. This concealment is associated with the depoliticisation of the Anthropocene discourse, which is significant in that it fosters neo-Malthusian arguments and racism. For instance, it is argued that unbridled population growth (in the Global South) and the demand for resources that results from it are responsible for the crisis (Gottschlich/Schultz 2019). It is a small step from such arguments to controlling population in the name of climate protection. Furthermore, attention is deflected from issues of justice and distribution and the necessity of changes in patterns of production and consumption in the Global North.

4. ... from the perspective of critical geography

In contrast, narratives about the socio-ecological crisis in the Anthropocene told from the perspective of critical geography focus on deeper causes and contradictions and highlight inequalities in the architecture of responsibility between North and South. The socio-ecological crises are not the responsibility of 'humanity' but are products of an unequal colonial and capitalist world order in which there are a few winners and many losers (Brand/Wissen 2011). In the colonial past, geologists contributed to this world order by mapping raw materials and precious metals. Once the position and distribution of the deposits were known, they began to be mined so as to feed industrial development and wealth in the Global North. The colonial powers were interested in raw materials such as gold or colonial goods – e. g. cocoa. Today's Ghana even used to be called the 'Gold Coast' after the coveted metal, and was colloquially known as 'the mine', making the matter even clearer (Yusoff 2018). The many slave castles along the 'Gold Coast' tell the story of another aspect of colonial exploitation in which people became a commodified good. Kathryn Yusoff, Professor for Inhuman Geography, explains how closely the

emergence of the Anthropocene is interlinked with this inhuman system, which transformed (black) people into a means of production. Yusoff shows that the connection between geological knowledge and the development of political power constitutes the Anthropocene (Yusoff 2016).

The question of when the Anthropocene began is thus not an innocent one. Investigation into its origins reveals the historical continuities in the way in which the processes of extraction and the appropriation and exploitation of nature are associated with processes of wealth accumulation and the development of the capitalist world system (Yusoff 2018). This asymmetry is characteristic of the Anthropocene, which, viewed in this way, began long before industrialisation. On the other hand, if the search for the 'golden spike' is reduced to finding evidence of certain markers in sediments, not only is the question of the Anthropocene's origins depoliticised but the suffering and deaths of black enslaved people are erased from global history. This creates an absence which is sustained into the present time and is important for the spaces of thought and action which make the future.

5. Inequalities and externalisation

The discussion above has shown that 'business-as usual' is not only or primarily precluded by the danger of crossing a biophysical or social tipping point in the future. A profound change of path is also urgently required by historically rooted socio-ecological inequalities and injustices, which are actually worsening at the present time.

5.1 Inequality

Inequality is primarily understood and measured as economic inequality. This makes it even more astounding that up to just a few years ago, there was no sound data analysis from which reliable conclusions about the development of worldwide inequality could be drawn. It seems unnecessary to say that this is not viewed as a coincidence but rather as the result of the furthering and protection of particular interests (Ernst/Losada/María 2010).

Thomas Piketty's book *Le Capital au XXIe siècle* drew attention to the lack of inequality research. Piketty analysed historical data going back to industrialisation and showed how wealth concentration has increased since the

middle of the twentieth century. This growth in inequality is the result of political decisions which promised that economic growth, technological advances and increased private investment – e. g. in infrastructure – was to the benefit of all. Instead, prioritising the economy over social and/or ecological needs led to an increase in inequality that substantially threatens democratic and social development (Piketty 2015).

Increasing inequality, whether between countries or within societies, runs counter to the goals of transformation, particularly as there is a widening divide between private and public capital. In many rich countries, public capital has been declining since 1980 while private capital has increased (Alvaredo/Chancel/Piketty et al. 2018), a trend due in part to privatisation policies. This restricts the scope for public action and management intended to achieve socio-ecological change – a dramatic development in light of the challenges. In Germany, as in many other countries, the public sector is responsible for services of general interest and for providing social and technical infrastructure and pursues the goal of creating equivalent living conditions in all areas of the country. De facto, however, the public sector is increasingly unable to provide basic services for the benefit of all. Various studies of recent years have shown that in Germany and in other countries, the divide between poor and rich, and between prosperous and declining regions, is growing ever larger and limits the future viability of regions (Slupina/Dähner/Reibstein et al. 2019).

Future viability begins with imaginings about the future that cognitively structure action. Local urban and regional research (on the knowledge level) and urban and regional planning (as policy practice) are still steeped in a way of thinking that follows the dictates of growth, modernity and development. They thus reproduce colonial mentalities (Bruns/Gerend 2018). This is revealed, for instance, by the elevation of the European city to the very definition of a developed, modern city. A contrast is provided by the Oriental (and hence underdeveloped) city which is devalued by this process of comparison. Such an understanding of the underdeveloped Oriental city is recorded as 'knowledge' in the textbooks of urban research. It is then transferred and given substance when neighbourhoods with a higher proportion of residents with a migrant background are automatically termed 'problem neighbourhoods' (Ha 2014). A critical review of these derogatory attributions is necessary not only in light of the increasing diversity of society. The 'repro-

duction of racism as a colonial legacy in the city' (ibid.: 42, translated from German) must be countered as a matter of principle.

The term 'development' (and 'underdevelopment') and the idea of 'modernity' are central elements of the Eurocentric world view and are reflected in notions of the 'city'. In cities like Accra (Ghana), where many people live without secure access to water, water provision is only thought of in terms of the central, networked water infrastructures which are required by structural adjustment support programmes and funded by World Bank investments. This is in line with Western imaginations of the modern city. Such reforms and investments have failed to reduce socio-ecological inequality[2] in terms of access to drinking water, but they have proved a lucrative source of income for Western investors. And it seems that this is precisely the reason that a decentralised, heterogeneous system of water infrastructure consisting of water sellers, tankers, wells and waterpipes, is inconceivable (Bruns/Gerend 2018). Or, to put it another way: alternative infrastructure solutions that are adapted to everyday practices and lifeworlds would challenge the Western hegemony.

Contributions from the South promote ontological and epistemological options that allow thinking to embrace a pluriverse (instead of a universe): 'the understanding of the world is much broader than the western understanding of the world. This means that the transformation of the world, and the transitions to the pluriverse or the civilizations transitions adumbrated by many indigenous, peasant, and Afrodescendant activists, might happen (indeed, are happening) along pathways that might be unthinkable from the perspective of Eurocentric theories' (Escobar 2016: 16). A transformative change of path that manifests epistemological openness and thus reflexively includes decolonial options inevitably questions power and dominance relations.

The geopolitical dimensions of development and transformation can be demonstrated using current discussions about energy policies. While decarbonisation of the fossil energy system combined with a drastic drop in energy use is of key significance for successful, socio-ecologically just transformation in the Global North, it is not sufficient to address inequali-

2 Socio-ecological inequality research – as a still comparatively young and fairly undifferentiated research field – can draw on still less data (Dietz 2014).

ties between North and South. Even the International Energy Agency clearly identifies such contradictions in the world energy outlook on their webpage:

> The gap between the promise of energy for all and the fact that almost one billion people still do not have access to electricity. The gap between the latest scientific evidence highlighting the need for evermore-rapid cuts in global greenhouse gas emissions and the data showing that energy-related emissions hit another historic high in 2018. The gap between expectations of fast, renewables-driven energy transitions and the reality of today's energy systems in which reliance on fossil fuels remains stubbornly high. And the gap between the calm in wellsupplied oil markets and the lingering unease over geopolitical tensions and uncertainties. (IEA 2020).

The sense of calm in the face of the disparities is shocking. By way of comparison: energy use per capita in Germany is circa 164 gigajoules per annum (BP 2019) and in Ghana is circa 1.5 gigajoules per annum (Energy Commission Ghana 2018). It speaks volumes that the figures for Ghana are not even itemised in the annual energy report by BP but are simply included in the 'rest of Africa'.

European energy policy is not just about energy security (especially not in the Global South), but is about safeguarding the existing geopolitical order, as the European Commission's Green Deal demonstrates. In January 2020, the President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen presented the new strategy for the EU's foreign trade policy, which includes ambitious emissions goals for 2030 and aims for the EU to be completely climate neutral by 2050. To this end, European Union policy, especially growth policy, is to be redirected to pursue the overriding objective of 'combating climate change'. The reorientation of growth policy is embedded in geopolitical notions concerning the position of Europe in light of global political changes (weakening of the USA and an up-and-coming China). This calls for a united Europe, which requires disparities between the European countries to be reduced. Even if the financial package is entitled 'Just Transition Fonds', the 'just' refers only to disparities within Europe – between old coal mining districts and abandoned industrial areas on the one hand and the economically prosperous regions on the other (Europäische Kommission 2020). The energy transformation in Europe thus continues to be based on a concept of growth

(even if it has been green-washed), and this growth in Europe requires an exterior space that uses less resources than it provides.

5.2 Externalisation

Unlimited growth is impossible and will only be made possible by drawing boundaries between spaces, income segments, ethnicities or other markers of difference. Growth as an element of 'capitalism cannot sustain itself from itself. It lives from the existence of an "exterior" […].' (Lessenich 2018: 42, translated from German) This unequal order of global resources (Altvater 1992) is deeply inscribed in people's lifestyles and everyday practices, in the form of an 'imperial way of life', as Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen describe it. 'The way of life of the Global North is imperial in that it requires fundamentally unlimited – politically, legally and/or forcibly secured – access to resources, space, labour capacity and sinks elsewhere' (Brand/Wissen 2011: 82, translated from German). Externalisation is thus a constituting element of the asymmetrical relationship between North and South. It is related both to the extraction of resources and the outsourcing of environmental impacts, risks or sinks (Gerber/Raina 2018; Foster 2011), and the impacts of the latter are at least as drastic as the extraction of resources.

Climate policy is one of the newer externalisation trends. For instance, the expansion of biodiesel in Europe has enormous effects on local land use and thus on the livelihoods of many people in the Global South. The emissions trading system used to implement the Kyoto protocol also follows imperial logic because industries in the Global North can buy their way out of obligations to reduce emissions – at the cost of development opportunities in the Global South. This system is therefore correctly described as 'carbon colonialism' (Bauriedl 2015: 16, translated from German) in that it reproduces existing inequalities and consolidates power relations. Countries of the Global South that – like Ghana – are characterised by a consumption of energy and resources that is far below average are left with hardly any scope for development.

The inequality of lifestyles and development options is conceptualised and evaluated differently in degrowth and post-development approaches:

> 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 (Foster 2011: 7).

Social movements in countries such as Ecuador or Bolivia are testing alternatives as part of this 'shift'. The matrix of objectives here is not built around profit but around social needs. However, Foster's choice of the term 'sustainable development' is misleading, as development is understood as the opposite of underdevelopment and is therefore rejected as (culturally) imperial. Therefore, the term 'post-development' was thus coined, not to refer to alternative developments but rather to convey a notion of alternatives to the ideal of development that involve local and plural knowledges (Escobar 1995; Ziai 2012).

6. Alternative spaces for thought and action – Provincialising degrowth

Although degrowth, with its fundamental criticism of the imperial lifestyle, has indisputable parallels to approaches like 'post-development', a number of authors argue that degrowth lacks links to the needs and knowledge of people in the Global South. This disconnectedness is seen as the reason why degrowth has no significant position in social or scientific debate in the Global South (Rodríguez-Labajos/Yánez/Bond et al. 2019). Escobar, for instance, suggests that there is no natural alliance between the different concepts and approaches in the transformation discourse, but that a pact could be produced in a productive process of mutual encounter, learning and unlearning (Escobar 2015).

Learning can be drawn from the social movements and the indigenous groups that have come together in South America to demand and live an alternative to the threats of overexploiting nature and resources. '*Buen Vivir*' ('Good Life') is an alternative, post-extractivist model intended to overcome the multiple capitalist crisis. It embraces plural imaginings of the world and the future and is therefore understood as an epistemological paradigm change (Gann 2013: 84). The participative and emancipatory character of the constitutions in Ecuador and Bolivia is emphasised, as is the resulting relativisation of Western modernity. The opening up of the concept of work is

central here, as this allows different social configurations and a good life. Buen Vivir can thus be understood as a concrete utopia with which to overcome colonial continuities.

In comparison, degrowth seems to be a relatively narrowly defined movement that could profit from greater reflection on North-South relations on the one hand and the plural epistemologies of the South on the other. In this sense degrowth requires provincialisation to expose Eurocentric perspectives in a reflexive process, so that ultimately the European context can be transcended and new epistemologies accepted. This is important for critical spatial and transformation sciences, but equally so for spatial planning. Political practice makes local and regional decisions that affect development trajectories and result in resource needs, governing far into the lifeworlds of people in the Global South.

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