The emancipatory project of degrowth

An interview with Andrea Vetter and Matthias Schmelzer, conducted by Meret Batke, Mai Anh Ha and Bastian Lange

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In debates on post-growth and degrowth, how do you dissociate yourselves from right-wing spatial semantics?

Matthias Schmelzer: One of the main thrusts of the postgrowth or degrowth discussion – in our German book on this concept we use both terms almost synonymously – is to confront the neoliberal, authoritarian and fossil globalisation with a vision of a more small-scale economic system that focuses on needs and care. This has certain superficial similarities with right-wing spatial semantics or imaginings, so that those on the right have at times taken up 'post-growth' as a keyword. In particular, the far-right faction of the AfD [*Alternative für Deutschland* – Alternative for Germany] expresses views that refer to a small-scale approach, and several years ago they used the term 'post-growth economy'.

From an emancipatory, left-wing perspective, the possibility of appropriation is of course problematic for critical debate and for a vision of a regionalised and de-globalised economy. That's why in our view the basic motiva-

tion and focus for emancipatory post-growth and degrowth policies should always be the prospect of global justice, which goes hand in hand with a call for open borders. Open primarily in relation to the free movement of people, not necessarily also of goods, services and capital – it may very well be reasonable to discuss certain restrictions there. For instance, implementing a post-growth economy in a globalised world economy will certainly involve controlling flows of capital in the transition period.

In discussing alternatives to borders, the degrowth debate uses the term 'open re-localisation' to clearly distinguish this from culturally closed 'bioregions'. A central part of degrowth practices, and one that is still insufficiently implemented, is for instance practical solidarity with refugees who have been deprived of their rights to freedom of movement.

Is that a kind of internal decolonisation or de-imperialisation that every individual should practise?

Matthias Schmelzer: In the degrowth debate the focus is on economic categories such as GDP that we have internalised and on questioning our Western vision of what makes a good life. Serge Latouche, one of the early pioneers of degrowth, proposed terming this a 'decolonisation of the imaginary', but there is also criticism of the use of this notion. In essence this criticism says that 'colonisation' and 'decolonisation' are terms that were coined to apply to very specific historical and social contexts and today their main function is to address racism and the consequences of colonisation. When these terms are transferred to another field such as economics, then their critical potential is taken and appropriated for something else. Nonetheless, the fundamental idea of questioning and freeing ourselves from entrenched imaginaries about hierarchical society and capitalist economies is central to the degrowth discussion.

Are there practical examples for this fundamental idea of degrowth?

Andrea Vetter: A change of perspective is needed to learn to really see the world in which I live. One example is the omnipresent smartphone. If I look closely at the phone in my pocket, what materials it is made of, which factory it was manufactured in, what infrastructures are necessary for it to work, then I learn to see what relationships are concealed beneath its shiny black

surface – namely exploitative relationships that spread around the whole globe. All the global, growth-driven, exploitative relations are contained in the materiality of the quite everyday things that we surround ourselves with – whether in the concrete of our houses, in the plastic and microelectronics of our devices or in the fossil fuels that transport us and keep us warm. Sharpening this view of the world helps me to discern the world in which I find myself and then to engage collectively with others to change these exploitative relationships.

Do processes like the planned phase-out of coal represent an opportunity?

Andrea Vetter: Yes, that could really be the case – for instance in the Lausitz region, a big lignite mining area in East Germany, there's a plan to invest 17 billion euros in the so-called structural transformation by the 2030s. This money could be used to initiate a socio-ecological model region, if there was a lot more cooperation with local civil society actors. Instead though, the road network is being upgraded and tax breaks are offered in an attempt to attract industry. I think it's fatal to try to move forward into the next 20 years with yesterday's concepts – with the same imperial ways of life and economic approaches that have led to ecological and social destruction. After 1990 and the end of the GDR, people in the Lausitz region already experienced one structural transformation, a brutal process. Now they deserve better than the foul promises of the same 'blossoming landscapes' that have not come true in the last 30 years.

What are the core topics and core processes of an emancipatory degrowth economy, also in relation to spatial references used by the political right?

Matthias Schmelzer: The right-wing and racist approach to space involves strengthening closed, bio-ethnic regions. Degrowth is about the opposite, namely global justice, for the sake of which globalisation processes must be driven back in several fields – like so-called free trade. This somewhat complicated line of argument means that it is not always easy for the degrowth discussion to gain a foothold in left-wing emancipatory debates. There's a lot of scepticism because historically speaking, most concepts that focused on regionalisation and criticism of industrialism were reactionary or against global justice.

It is especially important to talk about socio-ecological transformation, to stop people being afraid of the future and of changes. This needs to occur on a very concrete basis, which is why socio-political demands play such a great role in the degrowth discussion. Ecological and social issues must be very closely linked together.

In nearly all proposals of the degrowth and post-growth debate, demands for a radical redistribution of income and wealth are central – concepts that focus on a universal basic income or concepts involving radical cuts in average working hours and periods of employment. These are suggestions that could actually be tried out experimentally in model regions like the Lausitz, where transformations to phase out coal dependency are necessary. In these experimental regions, society as a whole must take on responsibility and ensure funding to make this sort of approach possible. Current politics, however, is not moving in the direction of transformations or a fundamental rethinking of economic and social priorities.

Is it understandable that people, for instance in the Lausitz region, are afraid of a third – ecological – transformation?

Matthias Schmelzer: The so-called 'reforms' or 'transformations' of recent decades have not improved the lives of most people. Fears or concerns are therefore understandable, as transformations usually bring something bad for people. But it is difficult to sympathise with an attitude that scapegoats people who are discriminated against, have fewer resources and less access to power. That is what is happening at the moment, because in the widest sense migrants and people of colour are being made the scapegoats. There are numerous investigations that show that there is no obvious rational connection between problems in the rural areas of eastern Germany and the immigration policy of recent decades. Nonetheless, many people believe this is the case and see concepts like homeland (*Heimat*) and right-wing nationalist politics as a solution. It is important to set clear boundaries against such racist attitudes. And it is important to make clear that the economic policy of the AfD is not one that will benefit 'ordinary people' – on the contrary. Nonetheless, in the current political situation it is an important challenge to convincingly convey the message that the pending socio-ecological transformation is one that really does provide a good life for all.

Andrea Vetter: I think it's also important here not to take a universalising approach and pretend all the rural regions of eastern Germany are the same. If you really go to a specific village and talk to the people you see that the conditions are different in each village. One village faces demolition to make way for a lignite mine – of course the residents there are pleased if coal is phased out quickly and their village is saved. In another village nearby some of the men work in mining and are worried about losing their jobs. In a third village the residents are resigned because the solar-panel factory there closed several years ago, due to renewable energy legislation that destroyed large parts of renewables industry in East Germany, which by the way had a similar number of employees to the lignite industry.

The difference is though that one industry has a powerful lobby behind it and the other doesn't. This means that media and politics tend to exaggerate phenomena and discourses that actually have little to do with the real life and perceptions of local people.

What do manifestations of right-wing spatial semantics look like in transformation regions in East Germany?

Andrea Vetter: In many East German municipalities a lot of people over the age of 60 actually tend to vote for the left, for historical reasons. In the election in Thuringia for example, it was primarily people between 30 and 45 who voted for right-wing parties like the AfD. This has its roots in the political vacuum of the 1990s when GDR state institutions suddenly disappeared and with them a lot of local cultural institutions where young people were socialised. Right-wing extremists from West Germany deliberately targeted the East at this time, doing 'missionary work' there. So it was not simply the case that 'the people' in the countryside suddenly discovered their racism, but rather that this was targeted and promoted by right-wing extremists and activists.

But it is also important to look specifically at good examples and options. There are many engaged actors locally who have for decades countered right-wing narratives with youth work and education, and especially in the so-called structurally disadvantaged regions there are also many spatial pioneers who are experimenting with creative, emancipatory and ecological lifestyles. I think there are certainly links to post-growth discussions in rural post-socialist areas – with these new actors who enter into abandoned

spaces but also with the experiences and knowledge of the older generations, whose everyday lives still include subsistence production, repairing things and being frugal with resources. It is indeed possible to link this local subsistence orientation with sustainable, feminist and anti-racist contexts instead of letting the right-wing propagandists do their work. But this needs political long-term work on a local level.

Matthias Schmelzer: Realistically speaking, it is also understandable that degrowth concepts strike more of a note in urban contexts, as degrowth is also about the deprivileging of people who profit particularly strongly from the imperial mode of living. Those who live in cities are also those who participate most strongly in the imperial mode of living, who fly most and who consume more than average, as high incomes strongly correlate with ecological footprints. That is also why it is important to set the discourse straight. The main problems of the imperial mode of living, of externalisation societies and for the climate catastrophe are not the car drivers in rural East Germany, and not the miners, but rather the growth-oriented, profit-driven economic system that primarily benefits an urban, globally oriented elite.

Is it possible to learn to live a post-growth life?

Matthias Schmelzer: The pending transformation process is an unbelievably multifaceted, complex and long-term project. If we work for an ecological, social and democratic economy, then it's important to understand how various transformation strategies complement each other. We need spaces where alternatives can be tried out on a small scale and new post-growth practices and imaginaries can be learned. In the same way we also need far-reaching reforms in institutions and infrastructures. And we need strong social movements that fight for counter-hegemony. That is especially important because what the present-day political parties propose in their party programmes is, in our view, completely insufficient for a future-proof society and economy. That's why we start with strengthening social movements, driving civil society discourse and so shifting the space of what is imaginable and possible.

Andrea Vetter: For years, the '*Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*' has been involved in organising many conferences, but we also deliberately take the degrowth

summer schools out to places, e.g. as climate camps. Temporary places like climate camps are heterotopias where new routines can be established and counter-hegemonic solidaric modes of living can be tested out. For one week, these heterotopias create a strong resonance between hundreds or thousands of people who practise energy sufficiency and democratic self-organisation – be it in using and caring for compost toilets, building solar turbines or organising shared childcare.

Experiences in workshops, camps, conferences or practical workcamps like this are an important part of transformative learning. Our target groups are often mostly young, highly educated people who haven't decided yet what work they want to do or where they want to live. If, early on in their professional careers, a lot of these people get impulses encouraging them to approach their lifepaths quite differently and not to seek the well-trodden paths, then that makes a big difference. If people decide to work for a socio-ecological transformation there are a lot of jobs to do: establishing new institutions, networks and cooperatives, as well as changing existing institutions from the inside. As a social anthropologist and transformation designer, I've witnessed over and over again the importance of such temporary heterotopias for making a profound change in people's lives.

What transformation strategies are required to work towards a post-growth society?

Andrea Vetter: The 'Laboratory for New Economic Ideas' works together with various social movements that have different target groups, e.g. with the network 'Care Revolution', which includes 80 smaller groups based in German-speaking countries concerned with the topic of care work –both paid and unpaid care-givers like nurses, parents or sex workers, and also care-receivers, who for instance employ assistants.

The idea is to deepen a discourse in wider society around care work. The people who are involved in 'Care Revolution' recognise the need for a society beyond growth but argue from a different perspective than the ecological one. We emphasise the links between the social and ecological crises and believe it is important to tackle both together. This means including the ecological question in the question of care work and the transformation of the economy and also the other way round – if from an ecological perspective we need a very different economy then we must put care work at the heart of

this different economy. We work with actors who are starting from different places and we draw up and support strategies about how the various issues can be more closely interlinked.

What challenges emerge?

Andrea Vetter: We need institutional, fundamental reforms that extend the scope of action for existing nowtopias and movements. Every time a nowtopia project starts in a concrete location, it becomes obvious that the existing laws, subsidies and legal forms are generally aimed at profit-oriented and large actors and work against socio-ecological pioneers. We need fundamental institutional reforms to change the parameters of the economic system – top-down, if you like – and simultaneously bottom-up strategies to create local ways of living characterised by more solidarity; they inspire and learn from one another. To achieve this, we need a counter-hegemony that involves interventions in the public sphere of the media and education, but also includes practices like civil disobedience and forms of radical protest. This is all happening at once and requires appreciation and respect for one another. No individual can tackle all the fields of social change at the same time, but together we can take further steps.