Analysis

Shifting Priorities in Degrowth Research: An Argument for the Centrality of Human Needs

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1. Introduction

Economic growth is neither socially inclusive nor ecologically sustainable. While in the rich countries the unequal distribution of wealth has reached the levels of the nineteenth century (Piketty, 2014), the Earth’s carrying capacity is being exceeded in relation to at least three planetary boundaries: climate change, the nitrogen cycle and biodiversity loss (Rockström et al., 2009). The corollary is that economy and society and the associated production and consumption norms can no longer be considered as a system operating in a theoretical vacuum. Significant theoretical and empirical efforts have been made to demonstrate how socially inclusive development could evolve within ecological limits and beyond growth (Daly, 1991; D’Alisa et al., 2014; Koch and Mont, 2016). An increasing number of researchers and activists call for a transition to a global steady-state economy (Koch, 2015) that would function within ecological boundaries. Although degrowth scholars generally accept that economic development in some form is required in the global South, the conventional development path – as in the North – is not advocated.

Less consensual, however, are estimations about how enjoyable or painful such a journey towards global environmental sustainability would be for the citizens of the rich countries. A particularly controversial topic is the issue of happiness or subjective well-being vis-à-vis objective welfare indicators. While a majority of degrowth scholars (e.g. Sekulova, 2014) appears to be confident that the transition to a global SSE would be accompanied by increases in both objective and subjective well-being scores, others are more careful (O’Neill, 2015; Fritz and Koch, 2016) and open up for the possibility that subjective well-being scores in the rich countries may (temporarily) go down if production and consumption patterns were to be brought in line with ecological limits. Judging by the historical genesis of ‘degrowth’ definitions the former position appears to have prevailed: In the declaration of the 2008 degrowth conference in Paris, degrowth was defined as a ‘voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society’, while the ‘objectives’ were ‘to meet basic human needs and ensure a high quality of life …’ (Research and Degrowth, 2010: 523). While this original definition highlighted the centrality of human needs and did not presuppose a simultaneous rise in subjective well-being along the way, an often-cited passage by Schneider et al. (2010: 512) is much more straightforward. Here, ‘degrowth’ is understood to be, among other things, ‘an equitable downsampling of production that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term.’ The latter definition also seems to have been behind the invitation text to the 2016 degrowth conference in Budapest, where ‘degrowth’ was defined as a ‘downsampling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet’.

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The question arises whether the degrowth research community should endorse this downscaling of production and consumption only if it at the same time increases or at least maintains well-being including in the short term. In this paper, we offer an argument for a return to the original Paris definition or, in other words, for a deprioritization of subjective well-being and, at the same time, a prioritization of human needs in degrowth research. It is structured as follows: The point of departure of the paper is existing empirical evidence on subjective well-being relative to scale and GDP/capita. We consider here both analyses of countries over time and cross-country comparisons. This is followed by a discussion of some methodological issues and theoretical shortcomings concerning the use of subjective well-being scores. These are the background for our plea for the centrality of objective welfare measures and, particularly, human needs within degrowth research. The next section identifies basic and intermediate human needs using the terminology offered by Doyal and Gough (1991) and outlines how this can be applied within the degrowth research agenda. Finally, we illustrate our argument for the centrality of human needs at the example of nutrition and argue that a needs-oriented degrowth agenda would be oriented at issues such as the following: What are the environmental impacts of different kinds of food production (conventional versus organic farming methods)? How do the different forms of production compare in terms of scale and the agricultural land-use required to feed all people? Do such scenarios suggest particular diets (e.g., vegetarian) over others (e.g., omnivorous ones)?

2. Subjective Well-Being as a Measure of Welfare and Degrowth

The development and optimization of objective and subjective measurements of well-being in the social sciences has proceeded in concurrent and occasionally conflicting ways. Both have, of course, their respective merits and justifications. The improvement of the objective quality of life such as the supply of clean water, sufficient housing or the access to medical care is widely accepted as foremost goals in research and public policy-making. However, precisely which objective living conditions are relevant and to what degree they should be improved are far from being self-evident. This is the background for our plea for the centrality of objective welfare measures and, particularly, human needs within degrowth research. The next section identifies basic and intermediate human needs using the terminology offered by Doyal and Gough (1991) and outlines how this can be applied within the degrowth research agenda. Finally, we illustrate our argument for the centrality of human needs at the example of nutrition and argue that a needs-oriented degrowth agenda would be oriented at issues such as the following: What are the environmental impacts of different kinds of food production (conventional versus organic farming methods)? How do the different forms of production compare in terms of scale and the agricultural land-use required to feed all people? Do such scenarios suggest particular diets (e.g., vegetarian) over others (e.g., omnivorous ones)?

2 Kahneman and Deaton (2010) distinguish between emotional wellbeing (also: affective wellbeing or hedonic wellbeing) and evaluative wellbeing (also: life satisfaction). While the former refers to the everyday feelings and emotions people experience (e.g., joy, sadness, stress etc.), the latter is concerned with peoples’ general thoughts about their lives. The authors claim that this distinction becomes increasingly important in prioritizing policies relevant to subjective well-being.

3 This study was based on comparative aggregated country-level data that do not allow for the consideration of transnational inequality as emphasized in transnational class approaches.
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