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Socialism Without Growth

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ABSTRACT
In this article, I take issue with (eco-)socialists who embrace an ecological critique of growth under capitalism, but remain supportive or agnostic of the prospects for socialist growth. First, I argue that economic growth is ecologically unsustainable—whether it is capitalist or socialist does not make a difference. Second, I claim that economic growth rests to a large extent on exploitation. While it is logically possible to have non-exploitative socialist growth, in practice it is unlikely. Third, socialist policies are likely to have a negative effect on growth. A transition to socialism is a transition beyond growth.

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Degrowth is a project that is “at the same time both ecologist and socialist” (Latouche 2011). Yet its reception at the pages of this journal was lukewarm (Engel-Di Mauro 2012; Schwartzman 2012). A main critique was that it is capitalism—and capitalist growth—that are the problem, not economic growth (Navarro 2014; Schwartzman 2012).1 As Torre Lopez (2011) puts it, many people still have needs unmet—there are goods and services that need to grow, not “degrow.” Schwartzman (2012) contends that the global production and consumption of energy has to grow if energy poverty is to be eliminated. The goal therefore cannot be to produce and consume less, but to produce and consume differently (Torre Lopez 2011). We have to degrow the military–industrial complex, Schwartzman argues, but grow technologies and infrastructures that can deliver more energy without damaging...
the planet (e.g. solar power). And on aggregate, this may well lead to growth (Torre Lopez 2011).

The question of growth divided ecologists and socialists in the 1970s (Dobson 2000). Eco-socialism partially healed the rift by arguing that capitalism has to grow or die, and therefore ecological sustainability requires overcoming capitalism (Foster 2011). Many ecologists and most degrowthers agree (see Eversberg and Schmelzer, n.d.). Differences start when some eco-socialists maintain an ambiguous agnosticism, suggesting that an alternative system (presumably socialism) could perhaps both grow and be ecologically sustainable (see Vergara-Camus 2017).

In this essay I argue that socialist growth cannot be sustainable, because no economic growth can be ecologically sustainable. Growth in the material standard of living requires growth in the extraction of materials. This is unavoidably damaging to the environment and ultimately undermines the conditions of production and reproduction. There is no silver-bullet technology that can make an increase in the material standard of living immaterial. Standards of living can improve without growth by a change of desires and expectations, or a shift from valuing material goods to valuing relations. A properly conceived socialism is better positioned to bring such a transition than capitalism, which is geared to pursue, if not produce, profits and growth.

This essay is structured as follows: The first section claims that socialism is concerned with use values, not exchange values. Use values cannot “grow” in the aggregate—incommensurate use values cannot be commensurated. The second section clarifies how I, as an ecological economist, understand growth. Then the central claim of this essay is presented, namely that no type of economic growth can be ecologically sustained. The third section claims that growth requires growing surpluses, and that in practice (though not in theory) surpluses involve exploitation. The fourth section argues that the reforms envisioned by socialists are likely to curb, not fuel growth. In the fifth section, I argue that the starting point for socialism should be that there has always been enough for everyone, if only we shared. I conclude with the political relevance of this diagnosis.

Two disclaimers: first, I intentionally do not define socialism. There are hundreds of different definitions, but my thesis operates at a higher level of abstraction than any specific definition. If any economic growth is ecologically unsustainable, then the precise definition of socialism does not matter. I am not arguing that any type of socialism will be unsustainable, but that any type of socialism that pursues and produces growth will be unsustainable. I am not interested in what model of socialism can be more sustainable or less capitalistic, although the implications of my argument are that a sustainable model of socialism should be one that manages to prosper and improve use values without growth.

Second, my audience here is (eco-)socialists, not degrowthers. I am not arguing that socialism is the best model for a degrowth transition. I am
arguing that if socialism were to happen, it would have to be compatible with degrowth. I remain agnostic over the details of the alternative “isms” that might create an ecologically sustainable, non-exploitative and egalitarian world, but I am convinced, like most readers of this journal, that such an outcome is incompatible with capital-ism.

Use Values Do Not “Grow”

One may differ on precisely what socialism is. But at a minimum, the orientation of a socialist system should be toward the satisfaction of democratically determined “use values,” expressing real human needs. GDP measures the aggregate of abstract exchange values times quantities of goods produced. GDP is a metric of a capitalist economy, premised on the absolute commensurability of distinct values through exchange (Kallis, Gómez-Baggethun, and Zografos 2013). However, the different use values of different people are “incommensurable” and only “weakly comparable” (Martinez-Alier, Munda, and O’Neill 1998). Which values to pursue should be democratically debated, but there is no way or reason to come up with a single aggregate metric of the economy or of welfare. Under genuine socialism growth should no longer be measured—growth will no longer be an objective. Growth is what the capitalism system counts, needs and does.

I agree with Schwartzman or Torres that the provision of certain useful things and services may have to increase. However, socialists should not use the word “growth” for improvements in things like health or education. We are not dealing with quantitative magnitudes. Children might need a freer and more holistic, polytechnic education. Patients may need more human contact and care by their doctors. Only under capitalist industrial production do such improvements assume a quantitative dimension (number of patients treated, average exam scores, added money value generated by hospitals and schools). Even for those things for which a quantitative increase is desirable (e.g. the number of bicycles produced or used in a city), it is more appropriate to talk of an “increase” that has an upper limit of sufficiency. In modern usage growth is synonymous with a compound rate of increase. Three percent annual growth in the number of bicycles means that every 23 years or so the total number of bicycles will double (1, 2, 4, 16, 32, 64, and all the way to infinity). Within a few centuries bicycles will cover the whole planet. Thus understood, compound growth is an absurd idea, be it growth of good or bad things.

Growth Is Ecologically Unsustainable

Eco-socialist critics of degrowth like Torres or Schwartzman agree that socialist planning should ignore GDP growth. But it is not enough to be agnostic
and plan to satisfy the use values of the people of a nation if these use values entail increasing carbon emissions, exhaustion of limited resources, or exploitation of the ecosystems and bodies of others. The global material and energy “throughput” has to degrow, starting with those nations that are ecologically indebted to the rest.

Energy and material throughput have to degrow because the materials extracted from the earth cause huge damage to ecosystems and to the people that depend on them. The amount of energy we circulate and use is directly related to environmental impacts. Energy is a direct indicator of our power to transform the environment. Not all transformations are bad, and humans are part of, and co-producers of, nature. There are also qualitative differences: the impacts of energy produced from fossil fuels and from solar power are different, probably milder for the latter. But a doubling, quadrupling, etc. of the total amount of energy produced (and of materials extracted) will sooner or later overshadow such qualitative differences. If the world is to consume double, triple, etc. of the energy it consumes today, powered with solar or wind, the materials extracted and the land occupied by wind and solar farms will become a major force of environmental degradation and pollution. Increasing amounts of energy will be used to transform ecosystems: build infrastructures, clear lands, produce more food, etc. An enormous use of energy and a concomitant transformation of matter cannot be coevolutionary with the rest of non-human nature.

In turn, a degrowth of material and energy consumption is not compatible with GDP growth. In all likelihood, throughput degrowth will lead to a decline of GDP. As O’Neill (2017) aptly puts it:

It is logically possible to have increasing GDP and a decreasing physical and energy throughput in an economy. However, it is a fallacy to move from claims about what is logically possible to claims about what is physically possible and another from what is physically possible to what is empirically actual.

The “logic” that O’Neill refers to is built into the convention of the GDP index. GDP is a monetary indicator that allowed capitalist economies to imagine that market value could grow indefinitely without any real physical constraint (Mitchell 2011). But let us move from a fetishized to a substantive understanding of the economy (Polanyi 1957). The economy is the instituted process through which humans transform their material environments to provide for their wants (Polanyi 1957). Material extraction and transformation is the substance of the economic condition. This transformation involves work—human work and non-human work, that is the work of draft animals or of machines fueled by fossil fuels. New technologies made human work “more productive,” but only in the sense of providing ways to mobilize more non-human work. A worker saws 10 boards per hour with a hand saw and 100 boards per hour with a machine saw. The source of this
extra “productivity” that reduces the socially necessary labor time is not human ingenuity or magic. It is the energy of the fossil fuel that moves the saw.

If this is true, then one would expect GDP growth to correlate strongly with energy and material use. Indeed, global GDP, energy and material use and carbon emissions have grown together. The bigger the economy of a nation is, the higher its material footprint or carbon emissions (Kallis 2017). A better organization of the production process (Smith’s “division of labour”) can increase productivity and lead to a relative decoupling whereby GDP grows faster than material or energy use. But this decoupling is always relative. Absolute reductions are unlikely in the long term if growth persists.

True, the use of one resource can be reduced in absolute terms if substituted by another. But this merely shifts pressure from one resource to another, substituting one environmental problem with another (e.g. reducing the use of fossil fuels but increasing the use of nuclear power or the land occupied by renewable sources, etc.). With compound growth, the effects of any such substitution are short-lived. The exploitation of a new resource sooner or later becomes unsustainable too. For practical purposes therefore throughput growth and GDP growth are the same thing. If the economy were to become ecologically sustainable, both would have to degrow.

What if we counted growth in terms other than GDP? Historically there is only one example of measuring output differently. The Soviet Union and the countries under its influence counted growth in the raw materials required for industrial output (“material balance planning”). This was a less fetishized indicator than GDP. And it saves me the trouble of having to “prove” that economic and throughput growth are the same thing.

In any meaningful understanding of the term, “economic growth” signals an increase of material standards. An increase in material living standards will require, well, more materials. This is independent of whether the economy at stake is capitalist, socialist, anarchist or primitive.

One could argue that in a socialist system we could totally change what we understand or measure as welfare reinventing and redefining the economy with a use value measure that could conceivably grow without impact (Torre Lopez 2011). Say, for example, that we define economic welfare as the number of times we smile to one another, or the number and duration of good friendships we make. As I argued, it is absurd to think of such qualitative goods in quantitative terms and measure, compare and aggregate them. But leaving this aside, the possibility of growth in well-being does not weaken my argument. Indeed, (sustainable) degrowth is a trajectory of decline in resource and energy use, accompanied by an improvement in well-being, welfare, use values, etc. (D’Alisa, Kallis, and Demaria 2014). One may argue that socialism is better positioned to bring more smiles. This is different from arguing that socialism can still bring “growth.”
Ecological economics also suggests that in the long term it will be very difficult to sustain growth, since the discovery of fossil fuels was a one-off event bound to come to an end. Georgescu-Roegen’s (1971) complex thermodynamic theory of the economic process cannot be waved off on the basis that the Earth is an open system with sufficient energy as long as there is sunshine (see Schwartzman 2012). Georgescu-Roegen was aware of this—his argument was not one of absolute entropic limits within planet Earth, but a complicated reading of the energy and economic questions from a thermodynamic perspective. First, Georgescu-Roegen argued that more energy use and order “here” comes at the expense of undesirable and disordered impacts “there,” “there” being the places where our energy and materials are extracted from and where their wastes end up after they are used. Climate change is the entropy reckoning of the order created by the industrial revolution.

Second, Georgescu-Roegen argued that there is a fundamental difference between concentrated but limited sources of energy like oil, which give back huge energy returns compared to the energy invested for their extraction, and abundant but diffuse sources of power like solar energy. The former are like lakes, the latter like rain. To collect the diffuse power of sun, one has to occupy land and spend resources. The proposition here, confirmed by data, is that the energy returns of renewable energies will be lower than those of fossil fuels (see Murphy and Hall 2010 for calculations). The land conflicts generated by renewable energies are related to their high land requirements (see Capellán-Pérez, Castro, and Arto 2017). The manufacturing of renewable energies requires lots of earth materials. And the fact that they cost more than fossil fuels might have something to do with their lower energy returns and higher land requirements. It is unlikely that the global economy of today could be powered with just renewables (and even less so if it were to grow 3% each year); but it is possible to thus power a much smaller one.

Georgescu-Roegen’s prediction was that sooner or later, by plan or by disaster, human societies will settle for a lower level of economic production and consumption, sustained by the limited and diffuse source of solar power. The productivity bonanza from low entropy fossil fuels is a one-off historical event, lost forever into high entropy greenhouse gases. This is a general diagnosis and does not depend on the organization of the society at stake. Solar socialism, communism or anarchism may be possible, but—if Georgescu-Roegen is right—they would not be a paradise of material bliss. To be sustainable, these alternative systems will have to have lower economic output than the one enjoyed by “advanced” economies today. The word “degrowth” captures pretty well, even if imperfectly, what it will be like.

This diagnosis is contested by many eco-modernists who believe that nuclear power, nuclear fusion, solar power, wind power, carbon capture and storage, or other “negative emission technologies” can allow an indefinite growth of energy use. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the
drawbacks of all these technologies. One may want to imagine that somehow a socialist economy, liberated from capitalism’s profit constraints, could develop such fixes. I address this paper to eco-socialists, who are generally skeptical and dismissive of technological fixes. The risks and impacts of nuclear power are not different for a socialist system—they are the same as in a capitalist system.

I also doubt that if there was a technology that could provide abundant, cheap and clean supplies of energy, capitalism would not have taken it up. The coal lobby did not prevent the development of oil, and neither did oil interests block the development of natural gas. If renewable energies could sustain growth, they would have been adopted as quickly as fracking was. My hypothesis is that renewable energies are not adopted because they cannot sustain an economy of the scale and pace of the contemporary global economy. This will not be different under socialism. What can be different is the ability to prosper with a smaller renewable economy, by sharing resources better.

Degrowth might be necessary, but this does not make it politically feasible. The challenge of reducing global inequality in a degrowth perspective is enormous. Schwartzman (2012) claims reasonably that if the minimum requirement of 3.5 kW per capita which is associated with high human development (as measured by the HDI) were to be secured for everyone in the planet, then for a population of 7 billion people a global power capacity of 25 TW or 1.5 times the present capacity would be necessary. This is an inconvenient statistic for the degrowth case. Schwartzman (2012) thinks that only communism can achieve the necessary technological miracle producing high-Energy Return on Energy Investment (EROI), impact-free solar energy, and securing enough power for everyone. I bet instead on a social miracle and hypothesize that under a system other than capitalism it will be possible to have fundamental social changes and achieve high levels of perceived well-being with much lower levels of energy consumption.

In any case, convergence to Schwartzman’s average global standard of energy sufficiency of 3.5 kW per capita requires a dramatic reduction of energy use in most OECD countries (e.g. US should reduce its energy use 3–4 times or more). Energy efficiency and conservation are not enough. Historically, the more efficiently we use energy, the cheaper it becomes and the more of it we end up using (Alcott 2014). A reduction in energy use will be necessary. Socialists in countries like the US or the UK would have to be already explicitly concerned with developing a vision of a social transformation whereby declined energy and material use will lead to a better, not

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23.5 kW may be an unwarrantedly high value. A Cypriot, for example, consumes 2.9 kW and an Uruguayan 1.6 kW. On the other hand, 7 billion people is an underestimate, as by the end of the century global population will be closer to 9 billion.
worse, life for the majority of people. I do not see this happening and I cannot see how denial of degrowth helps. Why nourish the fantasy that under socialism it will be possible to both have the cake and eat it too?

Democratic socialist planning would have to take into account the constraining requirement of a degrowing use of energy and materials. Jokingly, eco-socialist countries would have to measure the “material product” of their nations again, but this time in order to plan for its degrowth, not its growth. A sustainable socialism would only be one that plans with popular support for declining material and energy use, which in most likelihood entails decreasing, not increasing, industrial output. This serves as a reminder of the monumental transformation of desires, and the preparatory pedagogical work (yes, also at the level of values and imaginaries) that would have to take place if an eco-socialism were ever to become real. Refuting this stark biophysical challenge postpones the work that needs to be done.

**Growth Requires Accumulation and Accumulation Comes with Exploitation**

The “good things to grow, bad things to degrow” argument (Schwartzman 2012; Torre Lopez 2011) mistakes growth, an integrated process, for an accounting convention. Economic growth is an integrated process with interconnected inputs and outputs. One can write down on paper hypothetical scenarios where the output of one sector (say, military expenditures or the chemical industry) declines, and that of another (say solar manufacturing or yoga classes) increases, overcompensating for the decline of the former. But this is not how economic growth happens; solar panels or yoga teachers need inputs (materials, energy, chemicals, transport, trips to India, computers, housing, training), and they give outputs that may or may not be useful to other economic activities, that in turn may be necessary for their own reproduction and growth over time.

Can overall growth be maintained by increasing the number of yoga teachers and classes, and for how long? In seeing the economy as an aggregate of goods and services we succumb to the fetishization of the economy by mainstream economics.

We do not know enough about the origins and causes of economic growth, and what we know suffers from tautology and inverse causation (e.g. is growth a result of education, education a result of growth, or both are manifestations of a broader process?). Still, the broad agreement is that growth is the result of accumulation and productivity, the former feeding into the latter, as the accumulated surplus is invested into the development of more productive techniques (“productive” in the sense of substituting human with non-human labor). Accumulation requires saving and investment of surplus product from one period for more production in the next. Productivity is related to
the capacity to extract more and more product (and surplus) for each hour of work put into production.

Surplus product means that producers consume less than what they produce. For productivity to increase workers must be exploited more and/or that an alternative source of power and work (e.g. energy from fossil fuels) substitute their work. The living standards of workers may improve alongside productivity growth and accumulation, but only by using resources and ecosystems more intensively.

Vergara-Camus (2017) argues that I fall “back on an ahistorical understanding of growth that projects into the past and the future the dynamics that are essentially capitalist—which is what Marx criticised political economists for doing.” As he explains:

Capital accumulation in a capitalist society is not about surplus product (or under-consumption), but about surplus value, the extraction of which is possible because workers are not paid for the full reproduction of their labour power. Capitalists do not accumulate because workers consume less than what they produce. Capitalists accumulate because the wages they pay to workers do not include their social reproduction (housing, food, childcare, heathcare etc.) … Kallis is right that this leads to further exploitation of workers and nature, but he assumes that this would be the case in any type of society where production would grow.

I do not assume that exploitation would be the case in any society. But if workers were paid in full what is needed for their reproduction, then the society would simply reproduce itself—it would not grow. Logically, one might argue that if workers collectively control how their surplus is reinvested, then they might decide to pay themselves less than what is necessary for the reproduction of their labor power and invest the difference in technologies that would allow them to produce more tomorrow. This socialist accumulation would not be exploitation.

There are two problems with this. First, as Illich (1974) argued, whenever there is a large surplus, a hierarchical society is bound to emerge with “experts” dedicated to the management of the surplus, and laypeople working to produce it. Egalitarian societies have low surpluses, which they expend directly, without accumulating (Woodburn 1982). From this perspective, it might not be a historical accident that the Soviet Union turned into a hierarchical society (call it “state capitalism”) where workers ultimately did not control the destiny of the surplus. This was a fate written into its industrial production model. The accumulation of big surpluses undermines socialism.

Second, socialism aspires to bring an end to exploitation. A genuine socialist economy would not exploit the work or resources of other economies (through plunder, colonialization, unequal exchange under the disguise of trade, etc.); it would share care work evenly, rotate unpleasant tasks and compensate care workers with their dues for their reproductive work. It would not
shift its pollution upon others; it would pay its accumulated ecological, carbon or colonial debts, and it would restore the environments that it uses. I wonder what surplus, if any, could be left after all this. The only source of surplus for reinvestment would be the excess product that workers did not keep for their direct use and the satisfaction of their use values (which would be less than in capitalism, as workers would decide their own compensation). If most product is consumed for reproduction, and if less product is produced because others will not be exploited, it is unlikely that production will grow.

I am not using Marxist terminology here, precisely because, as Vergara-Camus argues, we cannot use the terms developed to analyze a capitalist society if we want to think about societies that are not capitalist. I use the terms “surplus” and “accumulation,” and not the more specific Marxist terms “surplus value” and “capital accumulation.” By surplus I mean the excess production of a society over and above what is necessary for its mere survival and reproduction (Bataille [1949] 1988). By accumulation I mean the investment of this surplus into the making of more surplus.

Surplus and accumulation existed before capitalism. Capitalism unleashed the process of accumulation from social constraints. Capitalism’s innovation was not that it produced surplus, but that it did not channel this surplus only into unproductive and ceremonial expenditures that reaffirmed the social order (churches, rituals, or monuments). Capitalism redirected a substantial portion of the surplus back into productive expenditures, notably research and development of new machinery. For the first time in history accumulation became perpetual.

Wage labor, its exploitation and the production of surplus value are central to capital accumulation—all this is well explained by Vergara-Camus. But capitalist societies (as distinct from capital) continue to draw surpluses from sources that other societies did. A capitalist does not make a profit simply by exploiting workers—he also makes profit by polluting without paying, benefiting from the unpaid work of subsistence farmers and women, and appropriating the free work of nature (fossil fuels or ecosystem services) that do not belong to him (Moore 2015). These are part of the surplus from which capitalists profit and which in turn fuels their investments (in Marxist theory they are treated as factors that increase productivity—see my discussion with Swyngedouw—Kallis and Swyngedouw (2017). Capitalists though care about profits, not surplus value, which is an analytic category meant to explain what is historically distinct under capitalism. Dare I say that a capitalist would invest even if he were not to extract surplus value from his factory workers, as long as he could profit by cheap fossil fuels or by exploiting slaves in the colonies providing cheap raw materials for his factories. Capitalists can pay their workers the reproductive costs of housing, food, or healthcare (and arguably they did pay them—directly or indirectly—for a while in some Western or Scandinavian countries), but only as long as they can profit
instead from cheap energy, materials and labor appropriated elsewhere. If EROI falls and energy costs skyrocket, however, the profit of a capitalist will go down. The only way to maintain profits is by exploiting labor more intensively.

Growth is a recent phenomenon. To date there is no case of economic growth that has not involved accumulation and exploitation of workers and/or nature. Growth appeared with capitalism but survived the abolition of capitalist relations in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. These countries did not abolish accumulation—they centralized it at the level of the State. One might classify them as “state capitalist,” not socialist. Defining capitalism in terms of accumulation, and not a set of institutions does not contradict my main thesis—it actually pushes it to its extreme. Only an economy that does not accumulate (and hence does not grow) can be socialist.

**Socialism Is Less Likely than Capitalism to Grow**

Progressive, socialist policies (e.g. a minimum wage, a basic income, less working hours) are often supported in the name of growth. The idea is that increasing the purchasing power of workers is a stimulus for the economy. A shift toward socialism, then, is good for growth too.

Let me posit a contrasting hypothesis. The things that socialists would like to see “grow” would not bring aggregate growth (unless we totally redefined output). First, spreading wealth more evenly, using more hands and minds than otherwise necessary, leaving environments and people idle, spending time to care for one another—all these are “taxes” on production that reduce “productivity.” In a crisis, an obviously unproductive expenditure, such as paying people to dig in and fill holes, may act as a stimulus to demand. But in the long term an economy cannot grow by digging and filling holes. The above reforms reduce the total amount of surplus that can be reinvested for more growth. Industrialization took off by concentrating surpluses in the hands of a few (capitalists or states), and reinvesting these surpluses for more growth, not by spreading the wealth to everyone or leaving the pastures and the fossils idle. China’s economy took off by becoming more capitalistic, not socialistic. The Soviet Union took off by a state-governed process of enclosures, accumulation and exploitation of nature and workers. To grow, the Soviet Union had to become (state-)capitalist.

Second, the source of capitalism’s dynamism is the relentless competition of firms for profits. This lies behind the constant technological innovation and upheaval of productive structures. Individual capitalists will exploit other people or nature when and where they can, for profit. A socialist system, not based on competition and profit-seeking, is unlikely to match this dynamism. (One may counter-argue that the profit motive heavily constrains and shapes innovation, and that its removal may unleash a repressed growth
potential. I can concede this point, even though ultimately such growth too would be ecologically constrained.)

Third, one of the key features of capitalism is the extreme and complex division of labor it engenders. We each specialize in a very small task in which we thus get much more proficient than we otherwise could. The incredible production of material wealth under capitalism has to do with this division of labor, facilitated by international trade (as noted by Adam Smith). Socialists instead envisage a society where people are not just workers, but also artists, craftsmen and players. Where they take care of their children and their elders, do their domestic chores and care for one another. Where dirty or unpleasant tasks are rotated, not allocated to those with less power. Such a de-division of labor and de-specialization is likely to reduce output. But it does not have to reduce the standards of living, if such changes are part of a desired collective project.

Finally, socialism often professes to a deepening of democracy. Real democracy is slow and requires much of our time—democracy slows things down, as anyone who sat in an assembly of the Indignados/Occupy movement knows.3 Genuine democratic socialism cannot grow at the pace of capitalism, which sidelines and destroys what slows it down.

There Is Already Enough for Everyone to Have a Decent Share

Ever since Malthus we believe that “there is not at present enough for all to have a decent share” (1798, 24). I hear often when I defend degrowth that “there is still poverty, so we need growth.”

Mill, Keynes, or even Marx responded to Malthus with the prediction that there will be enough for everyone, only the time for this will be tomorrow. But “by relying on economic forces to transcend themselves, Keynes, and Marx and Mill before him, are waiting for Godot” (Xenos 1987, 239). The economic forces that promise to transcend scarcity also increase needs along with production, ensuring that there is not and never will be enough for everyone. To live a dignified life and die a dignified death, the average person mobilizes energy and resources unthinkable even to royals of bygone eras. But this does not eliminate relative poverty. Having your parent die because you could not pay for an expensive treatment that a rich person can afford is as real a suffering and sense of poverty as it gets, and it is no consolation that a King 300 years ago would die from an affliction even more basic. If your parent, however, dies from a disease for which there is no cure, you will accept it no matter the pain, as part of life. “Basic needs” are always relative, and a function of distribution and comparison.

Focusing on production accepts the myth of scarcity, i.e. that there is not enough for everyone. This is a legitimating meta-narrative for the institutions

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3 Erik Swyngedouw often gives this example in his talks, and I borrow it from him.
of capitalism and modernity, which position themselves as the only ones that can confront scarcity (Xenos 1987, 239). Criticism of these institutions is possible, but only on the basis of a point in time that is always in the future, due to the functioning of social need, and so the criticism oddly winds up endorsing the institutions of scarcity while positing a different future because those institutions make that future possible. (Xenos 1987, 239)

The socialist starting point should be that there is already enough for everyone, if only the common wealth were to be evenly shared (Kallis and March 2015). The response to Malthus(ianism) should not be that humans are infinitely ingenious and know no limits, but that they can collectively limit themselves to a fair (and sustainable) share. We might debate how much is enough and whether there was enough or not already in Malthus’ or Marx’s time, given that what is enough and what passes as a decent standard of living is relative and comparative. But what one definitely can no longer maintain is that there is still not enough for everyone in a wealthy European or North-American country (I mean “enough” for everyone to live a reasonably defined decent life, not enough for anything anyone might desire).

There is still poverty, but this is not because of absolute scarcity. It is due to relative scarcity, an outcome of relative position and of competitive access to privatized commons based on one’s class and purchasing power. In a society of equals, everyone will have enough. They will have enough not because everyone will consume as much energy or receive as expensive health treatments as those the 0.1 percent of wealthy Americans consume today—but because no one will be left to starve with little energy, or die without cure, while another one enjoys unlimited energy and the best cures. The goal of socialism should not be to provide an abundance of goods that will secure that everyone has more than enough, but to make sure that what is produced is shared, so that everyone feels they have enough.

One must resist an accountant’s approach, which puts median incomes on the one hand, and the costs of health, education, housing, etc. on the other, only to claim that there is not enough and there is need for growth. The prices of houses are relative. In a well-regulated housing sector (not to mention socialist public housing or cooperative co-housing), and with more equal incomes, prices will be much lower than they currently are. A health system based on primary health care rather than expensive outsourcing, private insurances and procurement of the latest equipment, can deliver high quality services at a fraction of its current cost and energy expenditure. Poorer countries such as Cuba or Costa Rica have world-class public health and education. Even if one claims that there is a need in some countries for an increase in social welfare and public expenditures, I do not see why these would have to grow at 2 or 3 percent per year (the rate of the supposedly
necessary compound growth), unless there is such growth, pushing salaries, prices and costs of the health and education sectors upward too.

Growth always appears necessary in conditions of capitalist crisis. Output and public revenue decline, public expenditures increase to pay the unemployed and—in some countries—the interest rates to service debt grow, further stressing public finances. The paradox is that growth can never “end”: precisely when it appears to be ending, it becomes more needed and frantically pursued. In conditions of crisis relaunching growth is not just a matter of profits and conspicuous consumption—it concerns the well-being of everyone. Keynesians, like Skidelsky and Skidelsky (2012), reproduce this paradox. While envisioning a future where their grandchildren will live with enough, they maintain that right now stimulus is necessary to relaunch growth and recover from the crisis. The question, then, is “when will there ever be enough?” if when there is no growth, there is need for growth. From a socialist perspective, the answer is clear: never under capitalism, since capitalism is a system that either grows or collapses. The end of growth is therefore an argument in support of a transition toward socialism.

Indeed, the Global North—starting with Japan and now Europe and North America—experiences an end to the period of sustained 2–3 percent annual growth. Whether secular stagnation is here to stay is an open question. For Piketty (2014) an economic slowdown to 0–1 percent growth per year is unavoidable. First, there is the demographic transition and the end of population growth in Western countries. Second, periods of high growth are historical exceptions. They are either rebounds after a disaster (i.e. World War II), or of “catch-up” convergence at early stages of capital accumulation (e.g. Soviet Union or China today). Piketty asks how inequalities can be reduced without growth. This is the question that should concern each and every socialist. In capitalism the only case of radical redistribution that we know took place through the disaster that was the World War II, with the destruction of capital and big fortunes followed by redistributive “socialist-like” policies in a context of Cold War competition. In a capitalist world without growth exploitation increases and social tensions and redistributive conflict intensify. This is not something socialists should be afraid of. If the pie cannot grow, then it is time to share it. Given that capitalism cannot redistribute without passing through barbarity, these are times for socialism.

Political Relevance

Is this theoretical discussion about growth and socialism relevant? The immediate prospects of socialist governments in the West are dim, despite a resurgence of radical left politics, from the “pink tide” in Latin America (now reaching its end) to Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, or Syriza (at least initially) in Greece and Podemos in Spain.
Unfortunately, neither in discourse, nor in theory, do any of these parties seem concerned with abandoning the growth fetish.

Growth is so central in the imaginary of capitalism that is hard to understand why socialists would want to salvage it. One plausible explanation is political pragmatism. Growth is still a popular catchword, and growthmanship is still hegemonic. Within capitalist systems that can either grow or die, the sustainability of welfare systems and of decent living conditions still depends on growth. To finance their social programs while avoiding head on clashes with capitalist interests, left governments pursue growth. To be openly against growth becomes an electoral suicide in a corporate media environment that frames even mild Keynesianism as economically irresponsible.

It would be fine if the choice to not speak about degrowth was pragmatic and tactical, while the horizon was one of a transformation toward a society that would thrive without growth and with much less energy and material throughput. Mental frames, common sense and institutions take time to change. One has to be patient and strategic in outlook, choosing the right words and framings at the right time. There is first a lot of pedagogical and grassroots work to be done in the realm of civil society (in the Gramscian meaning of the term) until the rejection of growth becomes common sense. Radical left political parties can start with small changes, e.g. refraining from using a growthist vocabulary or avoiding framing their proposals in terms of their growth potential. Socialist politics have never been about quantitative increases in abstract exchange value. They were about specifics, about concrete use values: employment, a decent wage, dignified conditions of living, a healthy environment, education, public health or clean water for all (Dale 2012).

Being “strategic” however assumes that there is a strategy. Degrowth is dismissed not only by left politicians and parties but even by (eco-)socialists. The horizon itself is still far from accepted. This is why we still need the theoretical conversation promoted by this Forum. To the extent that many (eco-)socialists do not accept the diagnosis that growth per se is unsustainable, be it capitalist, socialist or any type of growth, then the degrowth debate is not superfluous and cannot be assumed within a mere ecological critique of capitalism.

This is not just a matter of theory. Critics of degrowth like Torres or Navarro drafted the economic program of Podemos. What intellectuals like them think does matter as it shapes left policies in a major European country like Spain. The view that it is possible to have “green growth,” if

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4While not endorsing degrowth, Navarro and Torres fortunately refrained also from couching their program in terms of growth, which is an important development. The basic idea of the program was a stimulus to increase the demand of low-income strata, directed toward the development of green industries. See my commentary for The Guardian at http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/jan/15/spain-podemos-should-further. Whether Podemos sticks to an “a-growth” discourse or mobilizes growthmanship as part of its populist politics remains to be seen.
only the economy is rationally and collectively managed, is misleading. Growth, socialist or otherwise, cannot become ecologically sustainable. And an economy that grows is less and less likely to be truly socialist. A socialist democracy should ignore growth and reorganize to produce and consume not only differently, but also less.

This is my main thesis and, of course, it might be wrong. But if I am not wrong, then socialist movements or parties that reproduce the imaginary of growth in the name of battling austerity are digging their own grave. Even if they were to win, they would have already been assimilated by the logic of the enemy, they would reproduce its disastrous ecological outcomes and be left unprepared to offer solutions for a necessary future—one without growth.

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