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Neither Productivism nor Degrowth

THOUGHTS ON ECO-SOCIALISM

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Eco-Marxism and eco-socialism are currently haunted by a polarization between a socialist eco-modernism and degrowth.¹ The publication of Kohei Saito's *Marx in the Anthropocene*, and the ensuing havoc on Twitter, was only fuel to that fire.² Behind the smoke, however, we find compelling research and arguments coming from both sides, and eco-Marxism is among the most innovative branches of Marxism today. In this there is much to celebrate. Yet, the growing polarization between socialist eco-modernism and degrowth is troubling in many respects. Theoretical discussions are often riddled with undefined concepts, hostile readings, and strawmen.

That both sides have easily identifiable weaknesses only fuels the polarization. The disputes are usually organized around dichotomies—e.g. “for or against growth”—which obscure more than they clarify. Even more problematic is that the polarization yields political harms, making class struggle harder. The two poles of the debate have attracted so much attention that more productive alternatives can hardly find oxygen. An eco-socialist movement should not be occupied with wrangling over “growth” or have eco-modernism or degrowth as starting points. Socialist class struggle in the 2020s must acknowledge that we cannot have infinite economic activity on a limited planet certainly not infinite abundance of physical things—but neither can we mobilize the working class by making “less growth” the focal point of our project. Lucky for us, we don't have to choose between eco-modernism and degrowth.

POLARIZING AWAY COMPLEXITY

Socialist eco-modernism (from now on only “eco-modernism”) and degrowth are multi-faceted and heterodox traditions, which are hard to describe by sentence-long definitions. Yet, they constitute distinct poles in a debate that is attracting increasing amounts of attention. The first camp argues that modern industrialization is primarily progressive, and tends to be relatively positive toward “growth.” We will here call this eco-modernism, but this is sometimes called left-productivism or prometheanism, and in some cases overlaps with accelerationism³ The degrowth movement is fundamentally a critique of infinite growth and “Western development.” The traditions thus represent two very different starting points for thinking and doing politics.

One could imagine that discussions between these two worldviews would yield fruitful results. Yet, for the most part, this has not happened. One reason is the nature of the debate. Where, ideally, people should use their opponents’ best arguments to develop their own, this is not (yet) the shape of the debate. Critiques are often based on stereotypes and the other side’s most extreme argument. Degrowthers criticize “accelerationism”—arguably the most radical version of eco-modernism, associated with Paul Mason, Aron Bastani and others—for believing that contradictions within capitalism will automatically bring an end to capitalism. While eco-modernists accuse degrowthers of romanticizing pre-capitalist societies, a claim degrowthers have consistently rejected. (But then enters Saito, arguing that Marx himself imagined communism to be some kind of “return” to non-capitalist societies.⁴)

Eco-modernists charge degrowthers with calling for more poverty. When Matt Huber argues that a “politics of less” overlaps “perfectly with a wider neoliberal focus on austerity that calls on all of us to tighten our belts,”⁵ the degrowthers must explain over and over again that degrowth is not about having less within the current system but about creating a totally new system. Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan argue, for example, that degrowth is not the opposite of economic growth.⁶ Degrowth is mainly concerned with a reduction of biophysical throughput and scaling down unnecessary forms of production and consumption in rich countries—not primarily with a reduction of economic growth. Especially not as measured by GDP. When Huber characterizes the degrowth movement as “revolutionary austerity,” this is, as Natalie Suzelis points out, a strawman.⁷

The divide between eco-modernists and proponents of degrowth is widened when discussions are organized through dichotomies. In *Climate Change as Class War*, Matt Huber develops his argument exactly by setting up a suite of binaries, suggesting and expecting that we pick a side on each of them. Do we want a “politics of less” or a “politics of more”? Do we focus on production or

consumption? Who is the political subject that can stop global warming: the “working class” or the “professional managerial class” (PMC)? Should we attend to a “proletarian ecology” or “politics of knowledge”?⁸

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Rather than the dichotomy of being “for” or “against” growth, we need critical discussions on which sectors, places, and industries should have more economic activity and which ones must be shut down.

Necessary complexity is lost with these stark binaries. When it comes to a policy of “more or less,” we obviously need more of some things and less of others; and to be against the “politics of knowledge” hides interesting questions concerning the roles of different kinds of knowledge in social change. If forced to choose, I would agree that production is “more important” than consumption, if this means that it is more useful to focus on large investments than individual consumption. This does *not* mean that consumption is not also extremely important, both analytically and politically. The binary also hides complex discussions about individual, collective, and productive consumption, the role of consumption with class consciousness, and more. And additionally, of course, consumption and production are not two autonomous spheres.⁹

The core dichotomy on which we are expected to choose sides is whether we are for or against “growth.” But do we mean growth in the use of biophysical or material throughput, in energy use, in human potentials, in capital accumulation, in PPP (purchasing power parity) or HDI (human development index), as a purely metaphysical idea, or as an increase in GDP? Since eco-modernist Leigh Phillips asserts that “the end of growth” is synonymous with “an end to technological development, an end to science, an end to progress, an end to the open-ended search for freedom – an end to history,” it is not surprising that he views those critical of growth as foolish, if not as full-blown reactionaries.¹⁰ According to degrowthers, in sharp contrast, only the foolish or the malicious could be unconcerned about the fact that a newborn today will grow old in an economy 18 times larger than what we had at the turn of millennium (given 3 percent growth).

Even when confining the discussions to economic growth, there are numerous aspects to consider. One is the source of growth itself. Kate Raworth argues that the obsession with GDP has been employed to justify extreme income inequalities and unprecedented environmental devastation. Is growth determined by how we measure it, or does it stem from capital accumulation, as argued by Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan? It is noteworthy that even when proponents of degrowth discuss the complexity of “growth” (see e.g., Kate Raworth), and when underlying processes are disclosed (see e.g., Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan) the analysis nonetheless often moves forward with ‘growth’ as the core concept.¹¹

Then comes the debated relation between ecological degradation and economic growth: Is relative, absolute or necessary decoupling of economic growth from increased environmental pressure possible? Additionally, we have disputes over connections between capitalism and growth, where the school of Steady State Economy envisions a variant of capitalism where population, physical stock/wealth and the utilization of natural resources do not increase, while the economy still progresses technologically and ethically. This stands in stark contrast to the more radical degrowth movement.¹² Making the picture more complex, the position of “growth agnostics” represents a more nuanced position than those that support or oppose growth *a priori*. But the problem is ultimately not that it is hard to take a stand in discussions. It is rather that “growth” is the wrong question.¹³

Rather than the dichotomy of being “for” or “against” growth, we need critical discussions on which sectors, places, and industries should have more economic activity and which ones must be shut down. Establishing new “green jobs” or sustainable infrastructure will indeed result in increased economic growth (as measured by an increase in GDP) in the short term, which obviously cannot be an argument against such policies. These are complex questions, but an ecosocialist movement seeking to mobilize beyond niche intellectual circles must provide concrete, place-specific answers to these kinds of questions.

THE QUESTION OF PROGRESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY (BY WAY OF THE 19TH)

Closely related to the growth/degrowth dichotomy is the question of whether or not capitalism has a progressive character. Degrowthers claim that insisting on the progressive character of capitalism becomes increasingly absurd as economic activity further tears the world apart and global warming accelerates; eco-modernists argue that the degrowthers want to force us back to the stone age.

We are, again, encouraged to choose a side. Yet we should be careful with bold statements saying that “modern industrialization,” “new technology,” or even “capitalism”—also concepts often understood very differently—“is” or “is not” progressive or reactionary. In the face of global warming, I appreciate Walter Benjamin for reversing Marx’s idea that revolutions were the locomotives of history; rather, revolutions are attempts by the passengers to pull the emergency brake!

However, let’s be honest: Socialism might represent a break with capitalism, but all revolutions tend to contain different forms of continuity, whether we like it or not, with huge temporal and geographical variations. That with which we break will also always have an impact on the future. Ecosocialism may be a *break* with capitalism, but it is still a break with *capitalism*.

One striking aspect of this debate is how often both camps use Karl Marx to support their case. Eco-modernists frequently quote Marx on the system's progressive character and the necessity of working-class action, with Huber claiming to return to "the core" of Marxism in the dynamics of capitalist production.¹⁴ Degrowthers, on the other hand, emphasize the system's destructive nature and the need for revolution. Building on new Marxological evidence, Kohei Saito takes things one step further, arguing that the "mature" Marx supported degrowth communism.¹⁵

We should continue to read Marx for a number of reasons. It remains the best starting point for understanding the roots of climate change; we cannot understand global warming without grasping the dynamics of the profit motive, capital accumulation, metabolic rifts, class struggle and class fractions. Marx is also—on a sunny day—the best starting point for changing the world. However, as Marxists, we must remind ourselves that just because Marx said something, this does not automatically mean it is true. We should be careful with the rhetorical exercise of first claiming that Marx "really" meant this or that, and then simply assume that *so should we*.

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The main socialist challenge is not to bring together “environment” and “class”; it is to reconcile the class struggle in the environmental movement with the class struggle in the workplace.

For example, we may perhaps need to abandon the idea that capitalism possesses an inherent progressive character. But we cannot reach such a conclusion only from an interpretation of Marx's later works. Instead, it must stem from our contemporary vantagepoint on how capitalism has flourished through colonialism and imperialism, as well as fascism and war, while also producing mass hunger and climate change. Similarly, the notion that degrowth is not a fruitful slogan for socialists does not originate from reading the young Marx, but rather from (failed) experiences in actual eco-socialist organizing. As Marxists, we should have enough confidence in our own analysis to avoid making truth claims solely based on the holy script.

But why the perceived need to justify such positions with quotes from Marx? If the point is to enhance our understanding of the world and to improve our strategies, then all is fine. However, I feel tempted to ask: Are socialist movements so distant from real influence that it becomes appealing for socialist intellectuals to return to "the source," to find guidance and energy and comfort? In other words, do we turn to debates in radical theory when it is challenging to be politically radical?

AND THE QUESTION OF CLASS

Perhaps the biggest problem with the polarization between degrowth and eco-modernists is that it hinders fruitful discussions around class struggle. Matt Huber defines classes standing in antagonistic relations to each other *and* he argues the working class is a separate class from the PMC, which includes the entire environmental movement.¹⁶ This is a bold claim. There can surely be *tensions* between many organized workers and many people within the environmental movement, but if there are *antagonistic* relations, this means class struggle. Is there really a class struggle between the working class and the ‘class’ that has occupied the environmental movement?

Huber’s belief in the antagonism between a progressive working class and a reactionary ‘professional class’ is mirrored, in some respects, by degrowth critiques of ecological imperialism. The degrowther Tazio Müller, for instance, has argued that industrial workers in the global North will not only be our enemies, “they will be our most effective enemies.”¹⁷ Here, conversation about class starts and ends by pointing out that workers in the global north have an ‘imperial’ mode of living.

Here again, this polarization effaces complexity and obscures ecosocialism’s path forward. To understand existing and potential relations between actually existing workers and climate change, we must also grasp the working class as heterogenous. We must understand differences between unions, relations to class struggle outside workplaces, geographies, age, gender, and much more. It is intellectually dishonest to ignore tensions between workers and climate, racism, and imperialism. But it is also politically hopeless to think these tensions are so great that “workers”—however defined—can or should not be subjects for stopping global warming.

It remains an absolute prerequisite for ecosocialists that organized labor (often alienated by degrowth movements) and environmental movements (often alienated by eco-modernists) are not only radicalized and strengthened, but also brought together. This should not be formulated as the need to reconcile the environmental movement and “class.” The climate movement is very much made up of people who do not own any means of production (i.e., the broad working class) and has as their articulated main enemy is the fossil fuel industry (i.e., a fraction of the capitalist class)

This is already class struggle. That class consciousness is low—sometimes extremely low—among parts of the movement, is indeed a problem. That problem is compounded by eco-modernists and degrowthers discursively reproducing and cheering the conflict. Rather than a classical Marxist starting point (relation to means of production), focus falls often on aesthetics and taste, culture and

education, and often (unconsciously or not) seeing “workers” as (white) male industry workers.¹⁸

The main socialist challenge is not to bring together “environment” and “class”; it is to reconcile the class struggle in the environmental movement with the class struggle in the workplace. Bringing together the broad working class is a difficult task, but should not surprise us: that has actually been the case for two centuries. Class struggle against ecological crises cannot be based on the idea that socialism means an incredible abundance of physical things for all workers. But neither can it start from degrowth. It is unavoidable that most people will always associate degrowth with an immediate aim of less economic growth (often GDP) in the here and now. Slogans matter, and it is hard to unite the broad working class on this slogan.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Schmelzer, Vetter, and Vansintjan argue that the “initial goal” of degrowth was to serve as “a provocation, a conversation starter, a shit-disturber.”¹⁹ I believe this provocation was necessary and brought important questions to the table. Today, no serious socialist can argue that ecological limits do not matter. However, for socialists, the main question is not whether we are for or against growth. This should not be a line in the sand that divides the movement(s) right from the start.

Instead of focusing on “more or less” growth, we should look in a different direction. Just a few years ago it would have been more obvious to start, for example, with distinctions between use-value and exchange-value. As Michael Löwy indicated in 2015, the concept of “more” or “less” growth relies on a quantitative approach to the phenomenon, while ecosocialism is a qualitative breach.²⁰ A socialist and democratically planned economy cannot be measured by the yardstick of capitalism.

When we fight to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy sources in a socialist way, our main concern is not whether this creates “growth.” We need *ecosocialist transitional programs* for planning, building, and organizing a new hegemony, and an *ecosocialist movement* to bring it into fruition, for a world that gives priority to human needs within ecological limits. This we can do without getting bogged down in ‘growth’. We will need both massive state-led investments in new energy *and* a reduction in the overall biophysical throughput. But *ecosocialism*—rather than eco-modernism or degrowth—is the framework we must work within.

To build a movement that can win, ecosocialists should agree upon a few principles. First, we cannot—contra eco-modernism—have infinite increase in economic activity on a limited planet, and certainly not centuries of increase in

biophysical throughput. Second, we cannot—contra degrowth—mobilize the broad working class or any broad movement by making ‘less growth’ the focal point of our project. In other words: ecosocialism must resist a system based on what is conventionally described as infinite economic growth, but we cannot *start* by directly confronting economic growth as conventionally understood in terms of GDP.

From this starting point follow a range of other questions concerning state investments, technologies, policies on land use, transport, how to organize consumption and distribution, which forms of production must shut down, and so forth. These must be addressed through concrete discussions, always with an ear to the ground and an eye toward nuance and contextual differences.

There will indeed be different views among ecosocialists, but a broad eco-socialist movement will benefit from disagreeing on this *political* level, rather than on abstract (often bordering on metaphysical) questions concerning “growth” or the inherent progressive character of industrialization.

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FOOTNOTES

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² Kohei Saito. *Marx in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

³ This is complicated terrain, as there are no standard principles for how the concepts are used. Sometimes concepts are used by critics, sometimes by proponents, and sometimes by proponents and critics as 'provocations' (e.g. acceleration as luxury communism). Here I use 'eco-modernism' as general term. This is also used by proponents of the direction, see Matt Huber, *Mish-Mash Ecologism*, *New Left Review Sidecar*, August 18 2022. <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/mish-mash-ecologism>. See also Stephen Maher and Joshua K. McEvoy, *Between De-Growth and Eco-Modernism: Theorizing a Green Transition*, 2023. *Critical Sociology*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205231177370>.

⁴ Saito 2022, p. 208.

⁵ Matt Huber. *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet*. London: Verso, 2022, p. 148.

⁶ Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan. *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism*. New York: Verso, 2022, p. 198.

⁷ Rikard Warlenius has complicated this with two points. First, despite claiming that they are not against GDP-growth, degrowthers devote a disproportionate amount of effort to criticizing GDP-growth. And second, if they see very limited possibilities for decoupling economic growth from increased environmental pressure, and argue that increased GDP-growth necessarily leads to increased biophysical throughput, then this must also go the other way around: decreased biophysical throughput will lead to less GDP-growth. See Natalie Suzelis, *Class Struggle Against Growth: A Review of Two Guides Against Extinction*, *Spectre Journal*, August 25, 2022. <https://spectrejournal.com/class-struggle-against-growth/>; Rikard Hjorth Warlenius. *Klimatet, tillväxten och kapitalismen*. Stockholm: Verbal, 2022, p. 199.

⁸ Huber 2022, see e.g. pp. 38, 64, 111, 188.

⁹ For relevant discussion, see also Maher and McEvoy, *Between De-Growth and Eco-Modernism*, 2023.

¹⁰ Phillips, Leigh. *The degrowth delusion*. *Open Democracy*. 2019. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/degrowth-delusion/?fbclid=IwAR2Enz4-OwF8U6YosDf3UVmeQLO7s-7hdrY_jKNeNBpOAjiigzuka12EW5M.

¹¹ Kate Raworth. *Donutekonomin. Sju principer för en framtida ekonomi*. Gothenburg: Daidalos, 2018, p. 35; Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 18; Saito 2022, p. 235.

¹² The tradition can be traced back to Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. For a contemporary defense see e.g. Ann Pettifor. *The Case for The Green New Deal*. London: Verso, 2020.

¹³ For a good discussion on growth, see Warlenius, 2022.

¹⁴ For critique, see Suzelis 2022.

¹⁵ Saito 2022.

¹⁶ Huber 2022, pp. 3, 20.

¹⁷ In "#123 Blow up pipelines? Tazio Müller and Andreas Malm on what next for the climate movement", 5 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnDeLXaifY>.

¹⁸ This will be further developed in Ståle Holgersen, *Against the Crisis*. London: Verso, forthcoming 2024.

¹⁹ Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 16.

²⁰ See also Michael Löwy. *Ecosocialism: A radical alternative to capitalist catastrophe*. Chicago: Haymarket Books. 2015, p. 32.