

Capitalism, Socialism, Degrowth: A Rejoinder

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I started this symposium making a case for socialism without growth. I wrote a theoretical piece. But I wanted to talk to the kind of democratic socialists that support Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn and remind them that ending neoliberalism is only half of the story, difficult as it may be. What is to be done afterwards matters as much, especially when it comes to questions of ecology. If democratic socialists do not have a new way to reduce inequalities or eliminate poverty, one that does not depend on growth and expansion, then their solutions will not only be short-lived and unsustainable, but also achieved at the cost of colonizing and destroying the worlds of others. I couldn't put it better than Eduardo Gudynas who recounted for this Symposium the story of pink progressives in Latin America and how they "fell back [on] a growth-aligned, and therefore anti-environmental, developmentalism."

My Symposium argument was simple. Growth in the material standard of living means, well, growth in the use of materials (and energy). More resource use means more impacts for people and environments. Whether the economy that produces such growth is capitalist, pre-capitalist or socialist makes no difference. What is different is that capitalism is geared to grow or die. Socialism could, at least in principle, secure a better quality of life with less resources and energy, and distribute them more equally. This is what I broadly call degrowth. And this should be the goal of socialists.

I stopped at this basic point. The contributions that followed in this Symposium enriched my thesis in many ways. Vergara-Camus reminded us that growth is a product of capitalism. Pre-capitalist societies grew in certain periods and contracted in others. Annual growth appears only with capitalism. Do not focus on the epiphenomenon of growth, Vergara-Camus tells us—look instead at class relations and the preconditions for capital accumulation, namely "the separation of the labourers from the means of production, alienated labour, the imperative and the dynamic of competition, and the limited nature of liberal democracy." Using examples from the Zapatistas and the MST landless workers movement in Brazil, he shows concrete instances where social movements tried to break capitalist relations and create post-capitalist worlds, with all their limitations.

Barca's contribution advanced the element of alienation present in Vergara-Camus' piece. She is right that much of the existing degrowth scholarship either makes the case for degrowth or proposes changes in the direction of degrowth. There is little thought on the politics and alliances that could make something akin to degrowth plausible. Barca asks "what political subjects and which processes of political subjectivation can make [degrowth] happen." The

middle class of intellectuals from which degrowth scholarship and activism currently draw is not enough, she claims. Her interest is in working class movements, including trade unions—but not only. Barca extends the notion of work beyond salaried labour, to include all those carrying out reproductive and care work (mostly women), often without getting paid. The “de-alienation” of all these workers from the product of their work—through the un-enclosing of resources, the establishment of new commoning practices, and the democratization of economic and political decision-making—is a demand where workers’ concerns can meet those of degrowth. Like Vergara-Camus, she bases this claim on the fact that alienation is an important precondition for and consequence of capital accumulation, and hence growth. As Barca puts it, “alienation of the producers from the products of their work is what leads to the reinvestment of surplus into increased production.” If degrowth aspires to change how surplus is expended, then producers should take control of the surplus.

Pineault’s thesis complicates this narrative, proposing a different theory of growth and accumulation than the one underpinning mine, Barca’s or Vergara-Camus’ pieces. Accumulation is no longer driven by the extraction and reinvestment of surplus from labour, he argues. And the main economic problem is not the generation of surplus, but its absorption. “An ensemble of social relations” is established to “mould subsistence patterns and ways of life around the process of surplus absorption through waste ... contributing to the class identities of both capitalists and workers.” Pineault concludes on a more pessimistic note compared to Barca about the possibility of a working-class mobilization around demands for de-alienation or degrowth. He argues that the class position of the working class “is inherently tied to capitalist growth as defined by the treadmill of over-accumulation.”

Vergara-Camus, Barca and Pineault complement degrowth theory by showing how processes of alienation, extraction and realization of surplus shape growth under capitalism. Gudynas enriches this story by pointing to a blind spot in both Marxist and degrowth theories—their theory of value, or for the latter, the lack thereof. He takes issue with the labour theory of value, which maintains the utilitarian premises of modernity under the guise of the notion of use value. Nature is not valuable just for its use, Gudynas argues. This Western view of nature as a source of usefulness collides with the indigenous worldviews from the Americas he wants to revalorize. For Gudynas, this is not just a theoretical point. Politicians in Ecuador or Bolivia, he argues, use a structuralist and determinist version of Marx’s work (see Vergara-Camus for a discussion of the many Marxs and Marxisms) to brush away indigenous and green concerns, defending mining in the name of development and the common good. Following a radical interpretation and recuperation of the concept of *Buen Vivir*, Gudynas calls for the recognition of plural values, whether related to use or not, including intrinsic values in non-humans, with “an openness to other sensitivities and practices.”

A core point of Gudynas’ is that indigenous worldviews deny the Western dichotomy of nature and culture, seeing a world of multiple human and non-human beings and elements in interaction. In her piece Finley argues that this is the foundation of Murray Bookchin’s project of “social ecology.” Bookchin developed social ecology against deep ecology. Finley takes issue with the nature-culture binary of Western modernity that, she argues, infected also deep ecology, and which locates nature somewhere out there, external to the realm of human affairs, passive and typically female, opposed to a society which is associated with maleness, whiteness

and dominance. For Finley, the problem in human relations is hierarchy, not alienation, and it is hierarchy that causes the exploitation of non-humans. In her words, “the central thesis of social ecology is that hierarchical society, not only capitalism, produces the ecological crisis.” Degrowth, Finley argues, should not be seen as a project of constraining ourselves within the limits of an external nature, but as part and parcel of a liberation from oppressive relations of domination and hierarchy.

Finley is right to criticize a certain strand of Malthusian environmentalism for reproducing the capitalist assumption of scarcity—imagining limitless needs clashing with a stingy nature. This pre-analytic view, she argues, prefigures authoritarian or market solutions to environmental problems. I am writing a book these days developing precisely this point (provisional title *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong*). I want to distinguish between a Malthusian environmentalism that is stuck with a scarcity view of nature, which is part and parcel of capitalism and growth, and a radical environmentalism that is also about limits, but in a very different sense than that of Malthus, best captured by the term “self-limitation.” Reading Finley, I was left with a feeling that she confuses my position as Malthusian, so let me explain the latter here, hopefully better than in the opening article. This argument is central for understanding the essence of degrowth and how it differs from the environmentalism of, say, the Club of Rome, with which Markantonatou (whom Finley cites) confuses it due to a superficial reading of the degrowth literature.

As I wrote in the opening piece, “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.” Malthus was wrong not because he thought that there were limits to growth (as a historical sidetrack, whoever gets into the trouble to read Malthus’ original essay and not second-hand accounts of it will find that, like subsequent economists and modernizers, Malthus actually did not believe there were any limits to resources or to agricultural growth). He was wrong because he assumed that humans cannot self-organize and self-limit their numbers, when all around him there was evidence that this was precisely what they were doing. The assumption that humans cannot control their production, reproduction or consumption—that these are subject to drives that know no limits and hence can only grow—is a foundational myth of capitalism. The progressive response to Malthusianism (i.e., that there will be enough, only tomorrow, if we work hard enough and produce more, or, in its socialist version, if we change the relations of production and produce more as a result) is caught within Malthus’ terms of the debate: it reproduces the capitalist myth of society clashing at a frontier with a limiting nature, pushing it outwards one step at a time.

My critique is the same as Finley’s, namely that there is nothing that suggests that our needs are unlimited and infinite. Our needs are socially constructed. By limiting and reducing our needs, we create abundance. The ideas of limitless needs and eternal scarcity are a central feature of capitalism, which produces scarcity and needs it to justify its relentless expansion of the means of production. Unfortunately, this is a myth that many socialists endorse when, in order to confront the regressive politics of Malthusians, they argue that there are no limits, and that with sufficient technological advance we can have all the resources we wish and keep increasing the material standards of living for everyone.

My rereading of Malthus wants to create the space for a different narrative. I want to distinguish between conservative Malthusian environmentalisms, which are the indispensable obverse of the modernist response of no limits, and carve out a space for the environmentalism of degrowth which calls for limits not as something externally imposed upon us, but as a conscious choice of self-limitation. Unlike what Finley argues, this does not rest on the assumption of an external nature whose resources are running out. We humans are co-producers of new natures with which we coevolve. We want to limit ourselves so as not to produce certain undesirable outcomes. We are not running out of atmosphere—we simply are willing to limit our consumption so as not to mess up the climate and create an uninhabitable world for our grandchildren.

This emphasis on a culture of self-limitation—premised on the fact that social needs are constructed and can be deliberated on, negotiated, regulated or limited—is what distinguishes degrowth from other currents of thought. On its own, liberation from social domination will not bring an end either to expansion or to exploitation of nature. As Cornelius Castoriadis put it, writing about the ancient Greeks, it was precisely the limitless freedom that the institution of democracy opened that posed the question of (self-)limitation more intensely than ever to the Athenians. Liberation brings the question of limits to the forefront—how do you limit yourself as a collective, and how do you avoid the risk of hubris? If something is unique about and worth learning from the degrowth discourse, it is this insistence on the question of limits, no matter how unpopular or against-the-grain it is, including among radicals.

Finley argues that we need not “abandon technology, leisure, or material comfort. A society living along social-ecological principles would ‘grow’ in ways that foster qualitative development and enrichment.” Vergara-Camus seems to agree. Growth is a problem only under capitalism, he argues, saying that “Growth in a post-capitalist society could theoretically be based on a more efficient and sustainable use of energy and resources, on better and more sustainable technologies, such as agro-ecology or the intensive use of recycled materials.”

Reflecting on Finley’s point, I am not sure what we will need to abandon or and what we will not. I think the math is hard, and we in the global North will have to forgo at least some level of material comfort. As I explained in my article, I cannot see any way we can sustain our current patterns of material and energy use and not damage the worlds of other people and beings. Redistribution will be central, so that the majority of the reduction is borne by those currently better-off, with everyone guaranteed access to basic necessities. Redefining how we perceive and organize technology, comfort, work and leisure will also be part of the change, so that any loss in material comfort is experienced as something good, not bad. This sounds like what Finley calls “qualitative development and enrichment.”

Why, though, would Finley and Vergara-Camus insist on the term growth, arguing that some kind of growth based on agroecology will be possible once capitalism or hierarchies are out of the picture? In my article I argued that any kind of economic growth (meaningfully defined), whether capitalist or not, is materially and ecologically unsustainable; that insistence on the notion and lexicon of growth when talking about alternatives is ill-founded and counterproductive; and that, from a socialist perspective, we can’t have aggregate growth, because we cannot aggregate incommensurable values. In Finley’s and Vergara-Camus’ pieces I

don't see a convincing response to any of this, other than a broad case that we can imagine a different world where there could be some different kind of (undefined) growth (by the same token we can imagine also a capitalist world where there is green growth—the problem being that this image is unrealistic).

Their insistence would make sense if the alternatives they studied and referred to didn't dismiss the goal of growth. Finley gives the example of "the worker cooperative network Cooperation Jackson in Jackson, Mississippi," using "an alternative model of growth based upon the deliberations of popular assemblies." Vergara-Camus's reference to growth based on agro-ecology hints at the Zapatistas. But as far as I know growth is not a word that so much as appears in the Zapatista's lexicon. It does not appear on the website of Cooperation Jackson, either. Finley may have in mind the mission statement where the activists mention that they want to "grow to scale ... becoming the Mondragón or Emilia-Romagna of the United States, and in the process transform the lives of working class Jacksonians." The Zapatistas too want to expand their project to the rest of Mexico and the world. But if the cooperative or peasant mode of production and living of Jackson or Chiapas were to expand and be generalized to the rest of the world, the result would be degrowth, in so far as we would have lower metabolic profiles substituting the intense metabolism of capitalism. If we were to imagine living lives similar to those of the Zapatistas, that would be degrowth, not growth—we would extract, produce and consume much less than we do now. The generalization of a peasant mode of living would dramatically reduce global throughput and output. (Vergara-Camus argues that post-capitalist societies, like pre-capitalist ones, could grow in some aspects and in some periods, and contract in others. But this would be a steady state, not growth—by which one can only mean a continuous 1, 2 or 3% expansion every year.)

Indeed, a Jacksonian or Zapatista economy can produce more social value and provide more meaningful work (and play) utilizing fewer resources—this is what I understand as degrowth, and it is very different from the growth of GDP, extraction, production and consumption. I would be mad to object to more cooperatives, or better care and leisure, or sustainable peasant economies. Degrowth does not mean less of everything. But I don't want to keep using the word growth when I speak about the flourishing of a cooperative economy or the evolution of a peasant economy. If I do, I remain trapped in a different mindset and matrix of terms and significations, and a nebulous notion of "qualitative growth" does not save me from this. If something grows, it must increase in some quantifiable measure—if by qualitative growth we just want to mean change, or evolution, then why not just use these terms instead?

No matter what the dictionary says, the word growth is almost universally seen as involving quantitative change (more of something), not just qualitative change. The quantitative idiom of economics has so colonized our ways of speaking and thinking that we find it natural to speak of "personal growth," as if after reading a nice book and smiling to our children, we personally grew a few decimal points. The word "growth" cannot be separated from the context that has imbued it with its meaning. We have to find new words, words that let go off the constant pursuit of improvement, words that accept that fact that life is about relations, about fun without purpose, about alleviating the suffering of others, and that, ultimately, life has no meaning and life has limits—we will all die one day and this is fine. Surely, life is not about the

pursuit of some ascending arrow that leads us higher and higher to nowhere. We need a language that ends the myth of limitless ascendance and of some ultimate salvation.

Growth, both the phenomenon and the word, is the child of capitalism (Vergara-Camus is right), a system that by its constitution requires ever more and more. But the child has now taken over the representation of the family from the parent. Capitalism and its institutions are legitimated and reproduced in the name of growth. The imaginary and pursuit of growth survived even communist states' attack on capitalist relations. Unless we start changing the words we use and the images that come with them, we will remain stuck in the capitalist imaginary of growth.

This was the core message of my essay. I hope is clearer now, presented in dialogue with the rest of the contributions in this excellent Symposium. To conclude:

Socialists have to let go of the idea of growth. It is not socialist.