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Degrowth and diverse economies: Shared perspectives and productive tensions

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ABSTRACT

As ecological and social crises mount, academic work which explores the transformation of unsustainable socio-ecological systems has flourished. Surprisingly, however, there have been few, if any, concerted attempts to consider the resonances and divergences between two of the most prominent approaches to rethinking the economy as we know it: degrowth, and diverse and community economies (DCE), respectively. In this Critical Review, I reflect on resonances and similarities, as they emerge from the academic literature. I argue that sites of dissonance, disjuncture or discomfort also emerge which have not been reflected on in the respective literatures thus far, primarily relating to questions of essentialising capitalism and growth imperatives. The recognition of this could lead to dialogues which enrich both perspectives.

1. Introduction

As ecological and social crises mount, academic work which explores the transformation of unsustainable socio-ecological systems has flourished. Two prominent approaches which have emerged to rethink the economy as we know it are degrowth and diverse and community economies (DCE), respectively. Surprisingly, however, there have been few, if any, concerted attempts to consider the resonances and divergences between these two communities.[1] Degrowth refers to an activist-scholar movement or community seeking to sustainably and equitably downscale production and consumption. While provoking a debate with global implications, it is particularly prevalent in the Global North: degrowth's origins lie in France in the 1970s where it emerged around the same time as the famous *Limits to Growth* report was published. Since 2008, large biannual degrowth conferences, mostly organised in Europe, have gathered a wide range of activists and scholars to discuss the aims and implications of degrowth research and practice. DCE on the other hand – most famously stemming from the work of feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham – is a community of researchers and practitioners who seek to understand economic diversity and enact new ethical visions of community economy. While J.K. Gibson-Graham's work originally focused on deindustrialising areas in Australia and the U.S.A, it has grown into a broader network in the form of the Community Economies Research Network (CERN), with members also concentrated in Latin America, Europe and Asia.

Despite noting links between work on degrowth and DCE, in a literature review paper on the *Geographies of Degrowth*, Demaria et al. (2019: 436) argue that 'these interconnections have not been systematically explored'. Given that this situation continues to this day, in this Critical Review, I undertake a partial exploration of these two schools, highlighting both resonances and productive tensions.[2]

Two preliminary reflections stem from my own positioned (and thus

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[1] Fourier (2008) does so, but only in passing. Schmid (2019) is one of the few to put these literatures in conversation but writes more about how change comes about, than how the concepts and conceptions in these schools of thought might align or not. Also, the latter's focus is on a broader notion of 'postcapitalism' rather than the diverse and community economies tradition, in particular.

[2] For the sake of brevity and respecting the format of these Critical Reviews, there can be no claims to comprehensiveness or a systematic review here. Others may decide to take this project up in a different form.

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partial) observations of both communities from within[3]: Firstly, that DCE scholarship rarely mentions degrowth and appears unsure how to relate to this major development in radical ecological economic thought[4]; Secondly, that degrowth scholarship has been conversely very willing to cite and engage with DCE scholarship, albeit, as I will argue below, in a partial way. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the prevalence of diverse and community economies (DCE) thinking – especially the formative work of feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham – threading through recent work on degrowth. Alexander and Gleeson (2021: 361) demonstrate this centrality when, citing Gibson-Graham, they assert that 'the emergence of degrowth will have to depend on a post-capitalist politics of participatory democracy and grassroots activism'.

There are, on the face of it, many parallels and sympathetic links that can be drawn between DCE and degrowth. I will first reflect on some of these resonances and similarities, as they emerge from the literature. While it is reassuring to assume harmony, I argue that there are also sites of dissonance, disjuncture and discomfort which have not been reflected on thus far. I highlight these dissonances, not to drive any great wedge between DCE and degrowth scholarship (after all, the approaches appear to share more than they differ), but to encourage healthy future dialogue: these sites of tension are valuable for thinking through some of the most pressing issues relating to postcapitalism and postgrowth. I will focus in particular on two interrelated tensions: One is the focus on capitalism and assertions or beliefs about its essence or nature; the second relates to notions of a capitalist 'growth imperative'. Examination of these two points will show that the use of DCE scholarship within degrowth up to now has been rather partial, usually using it as a stand-in theory for discussing grassroots community initiatives. This fails to grapple with the theoretical questions DCE has raised over decades with regard to capital, essentialism, economy, overdetermination and class. On the other hand, I argue that DCE – by paying greater attention to the vibrancy of ongoing degrowth debates – could contribute to, and learn from, a range of important discussions from which it is currently marginal. The paper concludes by arguing that the mutual richness of these two schools of thought could benefit from further dialogue and more concerted engagement.

2. Diversity and Degrowth: Shared perspectives

There are many resonances between the degrowth and DCE literatures, with Taylor Aiken et al. (2020: 6-7) going as far as to state that the degrowth movement 'neatly compliments community economies'. Perhaps most prominently, both schools seek to multiply and pluralise perspectives on 'the' economy: they seek out diversity and possibility rather than mainstream homogeneity and singularity. To do so, in their own ways, DCE and Degrowth work to disrupt a well-worn constellation of concepts such as growth, industry, progress and modernity which together signify a hegemonic form of 'development' (Boonstra and Joosse, 2013; Schulz and Braun, 2021). Degrowth scholars call this process of disruption a 'decolonisation of the imaginary' (Latouche, cited in Kallis, 2011), while DCE engages in post-structural 'deconstruction' (Gibson-Graham, 1996; 2006).

In both approaches, then, the aim is to move beyond the nexus of wage labour, commodity production and private ownership, to see a more colourful plane of ethical economic practice. Both pay close attention to what is ignored or overlooked in current mainstream representations, recognising diverse forms of alternative markets, non-market exchange, volunteer labour and gift economies (Bliss and Egler, 2020; Kallis, 2017; Gibson-Graham, 2011), (domestic and non-domestic) care labour (Dengler and Strunk, 2018; McKinnon et al., 2018), cooperatives (Cunico et al., 2022; Phelan et al., 2012) and other post-capitalist forms. Furthermore, both schools of thought end up orienting their overarching theory and practice towards the 'commons' as a key locus for non-capitalist economic organising (see for instance, discussion of both in Taylor Aiken et al., 2020).

In seeking out this economic plurality, both DCE and degrowth scholars desire to make visible the exclusions and shortcomings of current metrics and representations of 'the' economy (especially, but not limited to, Gross Domestic Product [GDP]). The roots of DCE in feminist economic geography have long drawn from (and contributed to) feminist critiques of mainstream economics, highlighting how much (often feminised) voluntary, informal, domestic or reproductive labour is excluded from prevalent representations. Degrowth, in turn, is founded on a desire to reframe assessment of the economy away from growth of the specific metric of GDP, undertaking detailed research on its emergence and persistence as a key governing metric (e.g. see Schmelzer, 2015). Eco-socialists and eco-Marxists have often critiqued degrowth for taking on 'growth' or other intersecting societal issues, instead of more directly focusing on the 'core' issue of capitalist class exploitation and social domination by the bourgeoisie (Andreucci and Engel-Di Mauro, 2019). Degrowth, for instance, broadens traditional anti-capitalist perspectives by identifying destructive growth fixation, developmentalism and productivism as problems not just under capitalism, but also under (for instance) destructive state socialist regimes (Andreucci and McDonough, 2014; Chertkovskaya et al., 2019; Kallis, 2011). Similar charges have been levelled against DCE over the years, especially from more orthodox Marxist geographers. The non-reductive approach taken to understanding complex social realities – or, in other terms, an attempt to grapple with the overdetermination of social life (Gibson-Graham, 1996) – is, to this author, a further parallel and common strength shared by degrowth and DCE.

Building on this, DCE and degrowth are characterised by a deep practical concern with the ongoing exploitation of human and more-than-human nature by mainstream economic practices. Rather than seeking 'objectivity' and distance from the world they study, the respective communities of scholars have often prioritised community-based action research, seeking to foment collective action and 'take back the economy' (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Kallis, 2017). As Andreucci and McDonough (2014: 62) state, 'degrowth as a social movement is inspired by principles of voluntary association and decentralised, horizontal self-organisation, whereby the promotion of specific alternative projects replaces large-scale, revolutionary forms of struggles clearly positioned against capitalism.' Both frameworks foreground the active creation of democratically negotiated economic realities which 'support a temporally and spatially equitable, sustainable, and dignified survival of the human and nonhuman species' (Schmid, 2019: 1). The shared focus for degrowth and DCE tends to fall on 'prefiguration and imagination' (Feola, 2019: 979) – that is, the creation of postcapitalism in the here and now, rather than at some future point (see also Schmid and Smith [2021]).

A variety of other common points emerge from the literature which, for questions of space, cannot be more fully elaborated here. For instance, both literatures hold questions of surplus and limits to be central. Kallis et al. (2022: 2), for instance, note 'dépense' as a 'core principle' of degrowth, referring to 'a festive expenditure of surplus, instead of its accumulation'. DCE scholars, grounded in post-Marxism, have also placed the question of surplus and communal disposal of

[3] The author has published on both topics, is a member of the Community Economies Research Network, and has attended various international degrowth conferences and gatherings. While this review appears to be somewhat 'critical' of degrowth perspectives, my desire is not to create sides and 'take' one of them. On the contrary, by the end of the review, there should be a clear sense of the potential for mutual enrichment and learning. The point here is simply to find an opening for dialogue, and other authors – with a different positionality – would surely find other openings.

[4] Phelan et al (2012) provided a rare early and very explicit encounter between DCE and post-growth thinking, in their study of the role of cooperatives in steady-state economics, but this work has remained peripheral or rarely cited in both literatures.

surplus at the forefront of their work (see for instance Gibson-Graham and Dombroski [2020]). Another example worth briefly mentioning relates to the manner in which both degrowth and DCE have been (mis) understood and (mis)characterised by some critics as falling into the 'local trap', over-emphasising the small-scale in their search for alternatives (see, for instance Mocca [2020] in relation to degrowth and Glassman [2003] on DCE).[5]

This section has reviewed some key commonalities and resonances emerging from the literatures on degrowth and DCE. With this reflection on sameness, however, we must be careful not to generalise, both within and between DCE and degrowth. There is strong dynamism and diversity in thinking within both schools that has real implications. Schmid (2019), for instance, differentiates between moderate degrowth and radical degrowth approaches (the former concerned with tweaking policy approaches through current political structures, and the latter seeking more far-reaching social-ecological transformation). Diverse economies research has also been growing at a rapid pace and has evolved to include a broad range of voices and empirical foci (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020).

3. Productive tensions: between strong and weak theories of capitalism

As already mentioned above, while the literature on DCE is engaged with frequently in degrowth scholarship, it is done in a partial – sometimes passing – manner. Many references, for instance, use DCE as an avatar for work focusing on local, face-to-face community initiatives, or they highlight economic diversity through brief reference to the well-known 'iceberg' diagram (Fig. 1). Such references, however, may overlook deeper theoretical questions posed by decades of DCE scholarship, relating to capital, economic structure, class and other issues. A fuller appreciation of DCE might reveal that the two approaches do not always sit together so easily. Fournier (2008: 534) hinted at this at an earlier stage, without developing the thought much further:

'The degrowth movement shares much of Gibson-Graham's critical intent, and also insists that the economy is open to choices and multiple possibilities; both approaches contribute to freeing the imagination and conceptualisation of material practices from the grip of capitalism. However, if they both share a concern to politicise the economy, they approach this task from different perspectives.'

One key point of divergence is in how each approaches the problem of 'Capitalism'. Earlier academic writings on degrowth saw an abundance of open questions and heated debates about the role and status of capitalism. Indeed, this led to a noted reluctance, at times, in degrowth scholarship to definitively criticise capitalism as such (Andreucci and McDonough, 2014; Schmid, 2019), raising the ire of more traditional Leftists (Andreucci and Engel-Di Mauro, 2019). One historical influence of this ambivalence is the so-called 'grandfather' of ecological economics, Herman Daly, who controversially asserted that a steady-state economy could be compatible with capitalism (Lawn, 2011). As the degrowth 'movement' or community has grown in prominence and voice in recent years, however, these debates have been increasingly set aside: a consensus instead appears to have crystallised that capitalism[6] is entirely inconsistent with degrowth (Schmelzer et al., 2022). As Tsagkari et al. (2021: 2) have written, 'Although degrowth started as an environmental concern, it soon became a deeper critique of capitalism, modernization and unsustainable growth.'

While DCE scholarship is also grounded in radical thinking around

Fig. 1. The Diverse Economies Iceberg shows the range of economic activities which take place hidden under the surface of the formal, capitalist economy. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

postcapitalism (Cameron, 2022), it is more likely to debate the framing of discussions around capitalism, rather than take an immediate stance. Notably, DCE scholars question the ease or certainty with which societies are delimited or defined as coextensive with capitalism and therefore entirely subsumed by it. To assume such coextension is described in DCE literature as 'capitalocentrism' and betrays a strong theory of 'capital as an economic system' which is inimical to appreciating the complexity of diverse economies. As Cameron (2020: 28) writes, 'This capitalocentric framing starts by already knowing that 'capitalism' is the dominant economic system, and that much that goes on in the world is determined by capitalism's never-ending quest for expansion.'

While many degrowth scholars are also sensitive to capitalocentrism, its presence in the literature is evident. Titles in the genre include things like 'A degrowth transition: pathways for the degrowth niche to replace the capitalist-growth regime' (Vandeventer et al., 2019). Kallis (2011: 875), for instance, also writes of 'the capitalist, market economies in which the majority of us live today'. In a similar vein, Robra and Nesterova (2023: 219) describe how:

'Capitalism and its growth imperative represents the dominant ideology in society (Dale, 2012; D'Alisa and Kallis, 2020). Concepts like infinite economic growth, profit maximization and capital accumulation are depoliticised and largely unquestioned; turning them into common senses (Buch-Hansen, 2018). Capitalism can thus be described as the current hegemony of society.'

By embracing a strong theory of capitalism, some scholarship risks already knowing what it will find: It reads for dominance, rather than difference – to use the terminology of Gibson-Graham (1996) – and only

[5] For a rebuttal of this from a DCE perspective, see Gibson-Graham (2006).

[6] Viewed in this critical perspective as a regime of accumulation depending on growth, while Daly (and Lawn) viewed the 'thrust for growth' coming 'from competition in the market' (Matković, 2020: 83). For this reason, Daly and colleagues preferred to focus on 'market and institutional reform' than abolition of capitalism.

then, when a fortress of capital has been perceived, looks for ways out. By this point, however, it may be too late – many potential allies, projects and agencies could have been overlooked or written out of existence (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

While there is a tendency in degrowth to assume that 'a society can be said to be capitalist as long as capital thus defined remains its predominant logic of (re)production' (Andreucci and McDonough, 2014: 60), Gibson-Graham and others have repeatedly argued that capitalism may even be quantitatively marginal in many so-called 'capitalist societies', when reproductive and non-market labour is taken into account. As such, it may be problematic to reinforce a language of essence, instead of seeking out productive difference in the first instance (although see Boonstra and Joosse, 2013; Smith et al., 2021).

One tangible site where this unease between DCE and degrowth plays out is with regard to the status of SMEs and the self-employed – seen as petty bourgeois and reactionary in traditional anti-capitalist thinking, but as sites of postcapitalist possibility by much DCE scholarship (Gibson et al., 2019). As North (2020: 101), for instance, writes:

'There are a range of social, cultural, economic and environmental drivers of economic decisions including passion, sympathy, moral judgement, embodied knowledge and practices, sentiment, trust, mutuality and reciprocity, which change in time and over space (Amin and Thrift, 2007). There is much evidence for the need to construct concepts of the enterprise and the entrepreneur that go beyond essentialist conceptions of business as irredeemably capitalist.'.

It is evident that degrowth scholarship is evolving and increasingly examining this question, however, with nuanced work at the organisational level emerging (Hinton and Maclurcan, 2017; Johanisova and Vinkelhoferová, 2019; Robra and Nesterova, 2023). One study in this vein, for instance, showed that even amongst SMEs operating in the mainstream economy, 48 % "avoid growth or feel no pressure to grow" (Leonhardt et al., 2017: 270). Another cites findings that only 2 % of sampled SMEs were focused on 'strong growth' and 'over 25 % did not set explicit growth targets' (Banerjee et al., 2021: 346).

4. On growth imperatives

> "We may no more assume that a capitalist firm is interested in maximizing profits or exploitation than we may assume that an individual woman wants to bear and raise children, or that an American is interested in making money. When we refer to an economy-wide imperative of capital accumulation, we stand on the same unsafe ground (in the context of the anti-essentialist presumption of overdetermination) that we tread when we refer to a maternal instinct or a human drive to acquisition."
> Gibson-Graham (2006: 16)

The central element of the modern-day degrowth movement's critique of capitalism, of course, is the understanding – influenced by Marx's work on the structural necessity of capital accumulation (Andreucci and Engel-Di Mauro, 2019) – that this is a system with an ineluctable built-in growth imperative. From this perspective, Andreucci and McDonough (2014) write that 'The consensus among critical scholars is that capitalism is inherently compelled to grow. Continuous self-expansion – 'accumulation for accumulation's sake' – is regarded as a structural feature of capitalism.' Amidst this consensus, Herman Daly's earlier position that steady-state capitalism may be viable is viewed with suspicion, if not ridicule: for Kallis (2011), any system which degrows and stabilises into a steady-state 'will no longer be identifiable as capitalism'. As already referred to above, a well-known debate centred on this very question, during which Lawn (2011: 1) asserted that steady-state capitalism was viable and that 'a capitalist system can exist in a wide variety of forms…many observers fail to recognize that the current "growth imperative" is the result of capitalist systems everywhere being institutionally designed to grow.' To back up his arguments, Lawn (2011: 10) highlighted three ways for a corporation to raise its profits:

'(1) increase output and sell more; (2) produce better quality goods and sell the same quantity of output at a higher price (revenue rises and costs remain unchanged); and (3) produce the same quantity of output more efficiently (revenue remains unchanged and costs decline). Of these three main categories of profit making, only the first involves growth.'

Since the so-called Lawn-Smith debate, there is a sense that critical scholarship, including degrowth, has tended towards assuming a 'grow or die' imperative (Matković, 2018). As the quote which opens this section states, this is at odds with a key tenet of diverse economies thinking. For feminist post-structuralist thinkers like Gibson-Graham, relying on notions of imperatives, whether for growth or profit, can be disempowering and a ground for theoretical closure, circumventing the open exploration of alternatives. This overbearing closure of alternatives is seen, for instance, in Srnicek and Williams' (2015: 38) pessimistic assertion that 'Tied to the imperative to create a profit, worker-controlled businesses can be just as oppressive and environmentally damaging as any large-scale business, but without the efficiencies of scale. Such problems are widespread across the worker-cooperative experience, having arisen not only in Argentina, but also in the Zapatista model and across America.'

The feminist economist, Julie A. Nelson, has been one articulate critic of notions of the 'growth imperative', arguing that such ideas are embraced as a shortcut when discussing the economy as it seems to give 'a veneer of physics-like scientificity' (Nelson, 2020: 147). This is what Gibson-Graham (1996: 8) wrote against when they describe how capitalism is problematically viewed (and thus reproduced) as 'a unified system or body, bounded, hierarchically ordered, vitalized by a growth imperative, and governed by a telos of reproduction.' For better or worse – depending on your perspective – a diverse economies perspective is likely to search instead for moments of uncertainty, agency and possibility, which question the totality of imperatives. Cameron (2020: 34), for instance, has tackled the myth of shareholder primacy, whereby corporate managers are assumed to be obligated to work in the financial interests of shareholders. Legal scholars, Cameron notes, 'argue that this model has no legal basis in corporate law but is 'merely' a norm that has become entrenched – with detrimental consequences.' No matter how deeply we might view those norms as being entrenched, for those who base their critique of Capitalism on notions of 'imperatives', this is uncomfortable ground.

Instead of discarding the notion of imperatives altogether, it may be just as effective for degrowth and DCE scholars to work more closely together to focus on the painstaking construction of diverse cultures around growth, rather than positing some inner essence to big-C Capitalism, as discussed in the previous section. DCE scholarship can also learn from such an engagement. It is apt that questions have been raised about the disconcerting ease with which more recent DCE scholarship seems to identify – and subsequently distance itself from – 'capitalocentrism' (Alhojärvi, 2020). Rather than DCE scholars washing their hands of what might be perceived as intangible and critical 'macro' questions, and degrowth scholars taking growth for granted, the two schools could serve to challenge and enrich each other on this and related topics. They could stay with the trouble of growth and its web of capitalist practices. Utilising the term growth 'dependency' rather than 'imperative', for instance, Schmid (2020; drawing on Richters and Siemoneit, 2017) engages in one such project, grouping drivers of growth into six categories: 1. Individual aspirations; 2. Credit and interest; 3. Property; 4. Competition and capital; 5. Technological progress; and 6. State institutions. Schmid (2023: 5) offers an intermediate perspective from within the degrowth literature, arguing that 'The interplay between community organising and conducive institutional arrangements offers possibilities to loosen the knot of growth dependencies and shift practice constellations towards social and ecological priorities' (see also Smith et al., 2021). There is fertile ground here for valuable work which is only beginning to be realised.

5. Conclusion

This critical review has weighed up some similarities and differences between two vibrant literatures in heterodox economic thinking which have come to prominence over recent decades. In spite of their expansion in both scholarly and non-scholarly publications, there have been no concerted attempts to understand degrowth and DCE alongside one another. I have outlined reasons that degrowth and diverse economies have often been engaged with in parallel, and argued that great conceptual depth and practical application regarding alternative economies can be found in this nexus. However, some dissonances also arise, regarding how we conceive of hegemonic economic systems, which are worth paying attention to so that both schools can continue to thrive and learn from one another. While proponents of degrowth could argue that DCE makes us ineffective in making stronger ethical claims around capitalism and growth, and DCE scholars could dismiss simplistic discussion of growth imperatives and capital accumulation, I believe it is more fruitful to see the potential for each to enrich the other.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Thomas S.J. Smith: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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