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Viewpoint

Beyond limits and scarcity: Feminist and decolonial contributions to degrowth

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We welcome this opportunity to participate in this important dialogue between political ecology and degrowth. We bring to this debate two issues: (1) perspectives on limits and scarcity, and (2) the histories and knowledges of feminist political ecology and decolonial feminism as a way of enriching degrowth's political grammar and strategies.

Robbins and Gómez-Baggethun, citing Mehta's *The Limits to Scarcity* (2010), both refer to the political ecology take on scarcity as a 'construct that is allied with elite power, not emancipatory process'. It is important to note that Mehta and her collaborators draw not just on political ecology but also on non-equilibrium ecology, heterodox economics, political philosophy and anthropology to question scarcity's taken-for-granted nature. Scarcity rarely takes place due to the natural order of things. It is the result of exclusion and unequal gender, social and power relations that legitimize skewed access to, and control over, finite and limited resources. As such, scarcity is a relational concept connected to market forces of demand and supply. This does not mean that scarcity is merely a social construct or only the result of power and politics. As argued in Mehta (2010), there are biophysical realities concerning falling groundwater levels, melting ice caps and declining soil fertility, and these biophysical limits need to be acknowledged. However, biophysical limits should not be used to deploy universal and blanket notions of scarcity that deny how women and men (especially the poorest and powerless among them) in specific localities perceive and experience scarcity. So-called limits and thresholds will always be perceived and experienced differently by different actors (cf. Luks, 2010). This means we need to discursively unpack what is meant by scarcity.

Conventional visions of scarcity privilege aggregate numbers, 'limits', and physical quantities over local knowledges. Thus, scarcity has emerged as a political strategy for powerful groups, who continuously reproduce problematic ideas of nature and society. These feed into simplistic and often inappropriate solutions that exclude poor and vulnerable groups from basic resources. Powerful actors use scarcity as a

rationale for the inequitable allocation of resources or for the application of market tools to manage property rights and 'economic goods' like water, thus undermining their cultural and symbolic meanings and values.

A feminist lens allows us to focus on these missing localised differences through an intersectional lens that accounts for gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, political affiliations and colonial positionality. As Susan Paulson in her commentary underlines, we need institutions, and practices that support 'the flourishing of pluriversal understandings and pathways'. Feminists point to how we need to re-politicize society through a politics of affinity that can challenge deeply entrenched ways of thinking about rights, justice, freedom, private property, individual responsibility, nature and culture (Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019). At the same time, there are very 'real' and non-material scarcities that neither Robbins nor Gómez-Baggethun acknowledge. For example, the scarcity of time is a pressing problem for many people in high- and middle-income settings, and many people suffer due to the scarcity of love, happiness and care. Here again the feminist lens allows us to tease out these non-material, emotional aspects by acknowledging the importance of care and love, and the damage done when these aspects of life are absent. Feminists theorize care as an ethical and political concept that allows for human and environmental well-being to flourish; its absence leads to damage, fear and turmoil.

As Gómez-Baggethun points out in his commentary, destructive human activities have led to potentially catastrophic thresholds, conceptualized by nine 'planetary boundaries' on which human life depends. But what is missing from his commentary, as well as from wider debates on the anthropocene and planetary boundaries, is a sense of unevenness in how these processes play out in different parts of the planet. There is a deep fragmentation along race, class, gender, with climate and economic crises affecting diverse locales, species, and social

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groups in markedly different ways.

The notion of the capitalocene also fails to focus sufficiently on power and injustice, or to highlight historic divisions between global North and global South, between men and women, colonialists and locals. Paulson's commentary discusses how colonial and racial systems used indigenous lands and enslaved labor to create what she terms 'socially enforced scarcity' and environmental degradation. Thus, nuanced accounts are required to reveal the varied and complicated relationships between dynamic environments, humans and more-than-humans, power, identity, discourse and control. As Haraway states, we need to go beyond the discourse of capitolocene/anthropocene not only because it is 'wrong-headed and wrong-hearted', but because it 'saps our capacity for imagining and caring for other worlds', and for 'recuperating pasts, presents, and futures' (Haraway, 2016, p. 53). We know from decolonial feminists that the western-centric, hegemonic, patriarchal and white imaginary of the world erases other knowledges and ways of living with nature. This applies to concepts such as 'ecological thresholds' and planetary boundaries, which erase pluriversal possibilities and positions of radical alterity. They also signal a return to controversial 1970s 'limits to growth' thinking, which privileges global environmental concerns over local ones, justifying top-down solutions at the expense of people and livelihoods. Furthermore, this kind of thinking fails to address the possible divergences and trade-offs between some people's notions of a 'good life' and scientifically defined environmental limits.

The ecological economic logic of finiteness, limits, growth and scarcity that underpins the commentaries by Gómez-Baggethun and Kallis fails to take into account how such concepts are perceived and experienced differently by different actors. While degrowth rightfully critiques the neoclassical and ecomodernist view that humanity can transcend finitude through market innovation and human creativity, it tends to naturalise both 'limits' and 'absolute' scarcity based on biophysical indicators such as environmental space, societal metabolism or ecological footprint thresholds. In assuming that there are absolute limits, degrowth appears to draw on the notion of the earth as a closed system. However, as acknowledged by a growing number of both natural and social scientists, all physical indicators concerning 'limits' are mediated through particular scientific models, assessments and cultures. They are therefore shaped by incomplete knowledge, uncertainty and a particular 'social life'. These are approximate attempts to chart human activities on particular planetary thresholds; as such, they are based on a scaled-up concept of scarcity with little relevance to real-world places and ecosystems, or to people's lives (Mehta, Huff, & Allouche, 2019).

We also disagree with Robbins' statement about the similarities between the utopias of degrowth and of ecomodernists. The latter are not attuned to power, history, inequality and socio-political difference. The optimistic and prometean tendencies of ecomodernists lead them to resort to 'techno-solutions' such as the next generation of nuclear energy to solve the energy crisis, geoengineering to combat global warming, and genetically modified food crops to address hunger and food crises. Such proposals are a reconsolidation of technological, supposedly gender-blind approaches that support authoritarian, market-based management of nature and society, creating new vulnerabilities for marginalized groups. This discourse of 'limits' neglects any fundamental rethinking of growth models. Decolonial feminism invites us to push back against the dominant narrative of economic development by asking ethical questions: Who is doing the consuming? Whose lives are being consumed? Decolonial feminism also points bluntly to the lies of economic development and asks that political ecologists listen with attention to those who have learnt to live with loss, so that we may recover our capacity to take up our relational responsibilities with others.

This feminist political ecology is aligned with degrowth and its questioning of the destructive, capitalist underpinnings of growth, and with its call to limit the consumption of the rich. Here we would agree with Kallis that we need to live/consume/produce differently—that is, within new limits. The call is for rich countries (and rich people) to

reduce their ecological impact so that poor people and poor countries may flourish, and to foster a different form of economics that is sustainable and socially just. This challenges the dispossession and the devaluing of life in all its forms; it is explicitly anti-colonial and anti-extractivist, and it ensures that the burdens of change do not fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable. While very appealing at one level, however, there are some unaddressed governance and political challenges around Kallis' call for 'collective self-limitation'. As argued by Dean (2015), governing within limits has far-reaching implications, especially for the global poor, since more often than not 'the burdens of solutions to these global problems continue to fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable' (Dean, 2015, p. 37). Rayner (2010) also has argued that asking wealthy people to embrace frugality or a different type of 'austerity' as articulated by Gómez-Baggethun may not work in practice, since limits are usually applied to the 'poor' for the reasons mentioned above.

We appreciate Robbins' opening up of the question of how degrowth arguments can be informed by 'committed ecological feminism' and can dismantle the nexus between patriarchy, capitalism and ecological degradation (Gregoratti & Raphael, 2019). We see feminist thinking around the concept of care as a way to reset the growth imaginary and to inform radical change, thus contributing to the degrowth vision to build societies based on caring relations, wellbeing, and equity rather than growth. Care is a deeply gendered and time-consuming activity performed to support the bodily, emotional, and relational integrity of human (and more-than-human) beings. The focus on care shifts degrowth from being a negative downscaling of production and consumption as described by Robbins to being a set of ethical practices that allow human and environmental wellbeing to flourish. To subvert or transform colonial difference, both in terms of language and political theory, scholars and activists based in the North need to listen with humility and care to the experiences and knowledges of those in the Global South; and they need to challenge the deeper patterns of heterosexist western capitalism founded on colonialism, racism and exploitation of nature. This requires not always taking modern and Western concepts and analytical tools as points of departure.

We argue that degrowth needs to learn from feminist political ecology in how to imagine possible futures beyond the theories, policies, and practices of capitalist and socialist/state-capitalist growth. Changing our ways of thinking, and our desires, habits and ways of being with others, requires new relations of care. It is our common responsibility to care which is the political and substantive work of creating degrowth futures.

In this vision, we need to respond to Luks' (2010) call to go beyond the 'scarcity of ideas' in the way we conceptualise limits and scarcity, and to look beyond 'growth' by considering 'anti-economic' thinking. This means moving away from the economic obsession with efficient options in a context of scarcity and towards feminist concerns for development processes that respect commons and livelihoods; it means recognizing the value of care and social reproduction in economic and ecological debates; and it means replacing efficiency with sufficiency (Wichterich, 2015) and exploring abundance. It would also mean taking potentially 'anti-economic' concepts such as gift-giving, generosity, reciprocity seriously. Valuing how all these attributes are central to life, to sharing, and to relations with others, including more-than-human others, will allow all beings to live/consume/produce differently and to thrive.

Declaration of competing interest

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