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The crisis of the growth dogma. A plea for an intervening social science

by Ulrich Roos¹

In "Die Farbe Rot", his impressive reconstruction of the development of socialist thought, Gerd Koenen describes some of the signs that have pointed to approaching revolutions in the past: the brutalization of political communication, the loss of respect for political authorities, and a Great Fear ("Grande Peur") understood as society's anxiety of the future, combined with the declining ability of the ruling elites to develop an attractive and convincing vision.²

All these signs, but especially the last one, can also be found in our present. The belief in the eternal wealth-enhancing effect of economic growth is crumbling before our very eyes. Insofar as "SEIN" still determines "Bewußt-SEIN", it is the direct experience of the progressive destabilization of the biological cycles of planet Earth that finally calls into question the previously hegemonic narrative of a perpetual increase in material prosperity and makes a transformation of our way of life appear necessary. This is the front line in the new religious war between the economic-political orthodoxy of constant economic growth on the one hand and the advocates of a new grand narrative that carries the potential for a profound transformation of social conditions on the other.

The extremely heterogeneous de-growth movement, which has grown stronger in the last ten years as a result of the global economic and financial crisis and draws strength from diverse and in part very old roots in the history of ideas. It represents an attempt to design a political narrative that, as a new hegemonic project, can make possible a different future for humanity. The great strength of this movement is that it directly attacks the striving for linear growth, which has become irrational and harmful since the planet's ecological regeneration capacities have been exceeded, and names it as one central problem of contemporary world society.

¹ I would like to thank Rolf Eckart, Ulrich Franke, Daniel Hegemann, Charlotte Rungius, Timo Seidl, Marius Thomay, Hannah Witt and Michaela Zöhrer for their intensive feedback on previous versions of this paper.

² Gerd Koenen, Die Farbe Rot, München 2017.

At the same time, and this is the movement's greatest weakness, the arguments critical of growth are demanding and it is an immense challenge to put these reasons into a simple form that can be grasped quickly by many people, which, as an attractive, immediately catchy and emotionally touching new grand narrative, motivates to act and gives courage.

Both, the resistance that stands in the way of such an activation and the great fear of political opponents are visible in the often polemical and irrational hostility that Greta Thunberg and Kevin Kühnert, for example, are currently experiencing when they present political alternatives to the hegemonic project. The fact that those who think differently are almost reflexively declared by the defenders of the growth dogma to be either insane, politically incompetent and/or dangerous, shows how intensively the defensive struggle of the stumbling old narrative is conducted along a friend-enemy logic. However, there is no lack of philosophical and sociological justifications and demands for a "new" narrative. The de-colonization of the imaginary (Serge Latouche; Cornelius Castoriadis), the *initium* (Hannah Arendt), agonistics (Chantal Mouffe) or the idea of concrete utopia (Erik Olin Wright) all provide important stimuli for sociological analysis and attractive ideas on the question of the transformation of social being. More recently, the growth-critical ideas of the Degrowth movement have also gained in influence. The ideas of Vandana Shiva, Alberto Acosta, Ulrich Brand, Barbara Muraca, Niko Paech, Tim Jackson, Klaus Dörre, and many others have one thing in common despite all their heterogeneity: They all design a new hegemonic project that has the potential to successfully transform the previous narrative of eternal economic growth.

Increasing prosperity in this world instead of belief in eternal life

The objective manifestation of the growth narrative's crisis have long since become apparent. In interaction with the hegemonic logic of growth, the "transformation...of the natural and human substance of society into commodities" described by Karl Polanyi has led to a multiple crisis in which the melting of the North Polar ice and the fluidity of the political are not merely symbolically interwoven: We are experiencing a historical momentum, marked by a particular need for shaping as well as a possibility of shaping, while at the same time the ways of its realization are contingent.³

The great transformation, of which we are contemporary witnesses, proves to be a non-intended consequence of action of the centuries-long hegemony of the ever-same promise of salvation of an ever-increasing productivity. A process that Hannah Arendt, in reference to Karl Marx, already described as "man's metabolism with nature", which has been so tremendously intensified that its rampant fertility will eventually threaten the world itself and its productive assets.⁴ This threat is real today. Today the unconditional will to increase prosperity in this world as compensation for the loss of faith in eternal life in the hereafter and radical anthropocentrism endanger the lives of numerous species, including man himself. The crucial question is therefore: Are the possibilities for shaping and transformation linked to this

³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. Politische und ökonomische Ursprünge von Gesellschaften und Wirtschaftssystemen*, Frankfurt/Main 1978, p. 70.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Vita Activa*, München, 2015, p. 407.

world situation, which can be understood as a multiple crisis, being used - and if so, in what way, i.e.: Do progressive movements or regressive forces generate more creative energy?

The decisive factor is likely to be which narrative is able to assert itself in the public consciousness as a new definition of goals and a great source of meaning. Will it be a narrative that combines a radical renewal of global social democracy and economic, ecological and political justice with profound ecological and social sustainability? Or will it be a narrative that does not or not seriously question the prevailing link between economic growth and prosperity?

200 years of "Without growth, everything is nothing"

The exponential growth of economic activity, which has been unchecked for over two hundred years, is not just one economic mechanism among many. It has always been and still is the guiding reference for all political narratives from the 19th and 20th centuries to the present day. It is true that in the 1970s those voices that have always been present are becoming louder, those that point to the fatal ecological effects and limits of this ideology.⁵ But when Klaus Dörre speaks today of the economic-ecological double crisis,⁶ when Alberto Acosta and Ulrich Brand feel the need to point out the ecological limits of economic growth almost 50 years after the first report to the Club of Rome,⁷ when the United Nations describes the causal connection between growing gross domestic product (GDP) and the destruction of nature,⁸ then at least two things become clear: that, on the one hand, knowledge about the coupling of economic activity and damage to the ecosphere is "in the world", but that this knowledge still does not guide action in the political decision-making systems of humanity.

To this day, these ecological limits to economic growth are grossly ignored both by the political centres and by the vast majority of the theories of economics. And the now dominant real wings of the green parties do not question economic growth in principle either, but believe, contrary to all previous experience, in the reconciliation of growth and sustainability in the sense of "green" growth. ^[P]_{SEP} Despite all the scientific studies that point to the direct and still ongoing link between economic growth and environmental destruction (in addition to climate change, the accelerated extinction of species and the unchecked chemical burden on the global ecological cycles are particularly acute and worrying), the world's political decision-making centres still cling to the ideology of economic growth.⁹ Scientific studies have long been on the table, for example on the problem of relative and absolute decoupling

⁵ Dennis Meadows et al., *Die Grenzen des Wachstums*, Stuttgart, 1972; Herman Daly, *Toward a Steady-State Economy*, San Francisco 1973.

⁶ Klaus Dörre, *Kapitalismus im Wachstumsdilemma. Die Verdrängung der ökologischen Krisendimension und ihre Folgen*, in: *WSI Mitteilungen*, 2/2013, p. 149-151.

⁷ Alberto Acosta und Ulrich Brand, *Radikale Alternativen*, München 2018.

⁸ United Nations, *Back to Our Common Future*, New York 2012.

⁹ Even the hard-won Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (2015) and the entire UN Agenda 2030, for example, continue to uphold the primacy of economic growth, which is once again regarded as an absolutely necessary prerequisite for achieving the sustainability goals at all, i.e. to be able to "finance" them. The poison will therefore continue to be administered in large doses as medicine.

or the various forms of the rebound effect¹⁰ - as well as knowledge of the losses of commons and "natural capital", i.e. the issue of "declining natural services" and negative externalities, which are not taken into account in the process of pricing.

Ecology, economy and politics as three dimensions of the same process

Ecology, economy and politics, we could learn from this, are not separate entities to be treated independently of each other, but three dimensions of the same process, which can only be understood in an overall context. Any form of demarcation between these dimensions has become questionable in its political implications and motives. This also includes the separation of natural, economic and social sciences. The promise of maximizing knowledge through the division of labor and specialization of science has not been fully realized. On the contrary: the fragmentation of the sciences, especially the social sciences, is a massive obstacle to the genesis of a "knowledge of the world" that transcends the disciplines.

The unbounded economic actions have direct political and ecological effects. A social analysis or an analysis of (inter)national politics that has little or no economic knowledge and competence therefore produces hardly any helpful theories for the social reflection of the present. This also applies to the social science discipline of economics when it forgets the originally political character of the subject. Moreover, many economists seem to have lost sight of the fact that markets do not operate unconditionally under conditions of Pareto equilibria, but are subject to political power mechanisms, the pursuit of cartel formation or the influencing of political decisions in favour of certain market participants. Therefore, it is necessary to repeatedly check markets for their socially intended and unintended consequences of action and, if necessary, to regulate them politically.

In order to understand the world and explain what is happening, it is therefore necessary to understand the essential physical, chemical, biological, economic and political mechanisms. On such a shared understanding it can be seen, among other things, that a re-orientation of the world economy towards the needs of the world society as well as a return of economics to its function as a reflexive social science are of great value. Whether, in this context and in view of the global threat to the ecosphere, a science [in German: "*Volkswirtschaft*"] that defines itself "nationally" should still want to serve a "people" or whether science should in future be founded not only supradisciplinarily but also supranationally seems to be an increasingly relevant question for our future. This also addresses the problem of how to think about a constitutional world society and how to democratize supradisciplinary and supranational knowledge.

Terrestrial perspective instead of anthropocentrism and methodological nationalism

In particular, the idea of a democratization of knowledge raises the question of how society can be thought in the future - and what view it takes of itself and its relationship to the ecosphere.

¹⁰ Tilman Santarius, Der Rebound-Effekt: Die Illusion des grünen Wachstums, in: Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik, 12/2013, pp. 67-74.

The analysis of the economic-ecological-political discourses reveals here a break line which, roughly sketched, runs between a national [in German: “nationalgesellschaftlich”]-communitarian-anthropocentric and a world social [in German: “weltgesellschaftliche”]-cosmopolitan-terrestrial position. While the hegemonic logic of economic growth remains bound to the nation state as the central political entity and to the principle of competition, and while these both institutions mutually strengthen each other, the de-growth movement often takes a cosmopolitan perspective, with very different answers to the question of what function the nation state should still have in the future.

What is decisive, however, is first of all the fundamental difference between, on the one hand, the hitherto hegemonic perspective, which aims at increasing the prosperity of people within a space limited by the nation state, and this initially independently of questions of distributive justice and inequality within and between the nation-state spaces. And on the other hand, a perspective that reflects on the question of the future of the Earth's biological cycles and a good life from the perspective of the entire living and inanimate nature.

This fault line can also be traced with the help of an analysis of contemporary protest movements. Along the new central social conflict line of "increase in prosperity qua green GDP growth" vs. "good life as protection of the biosphere and sufficiency" different protest movements are forming. Protests of the yellow vest type in France or the movement "Aufstehen" (in English: Rising up) in Germany are driven primarily by fears of economic loss and experiences of inequality. These protest movements are defined and organized by national society, do not question the hegemonic narrative of the logic of increase, but merely demand a "fairer" allocation of the values created. This can be distinguished from the "Fridays for Future" demonstrations or the protests around the Hambach Forest, for example, which are also mostly organized along national networks (Fridays for Future Germany or Brazil) in form, but are determined by a terrestrial, environmentally ethical positioning.

Despite all this, the protests against economic inequality and the struggle to preserve the planetary ecosphere may go hand in hand in some respects, but they are not identical. As little as every struggle against increasing economic inequality is tantamount to a critique of capitalism, as numerous nationally-egoistically, communitarianist trade unions have been demonstrating for decades, the answer to the question of which form of economic organization is most conducive to the goal of preserving the ecosphere is just as ambiguous (as evidenced, for example, by the experience of massive environmental destruction by planned economies). The criticism of the hegemonic logic of a continuous increase in prosperity at the expense of the biosphere is precisely no natural ally of those movements that demand redistribution (in part) only in order to satisfy the consumption needs of a life otherwise experienced as meaningless. To maintain the flow of payment transactions without at the same time demanding a drastic relief of the natural cycles. In other words, a reduction in inequality does not necessarily mean a reduction in environmental pollution. However, this also applies vice versa. It therefore appears by no means inevitable to adopt a position that links the two struggles, but it does seem possible.

The decisive factor here is probably whether the planet and potentially the entire universe are anthropocentrically understood as a mere "environment", whose centre is formed by man and

his national societies, or whether the starting point of the consideration is the whole, i.e. at least the planet and its biological cycles, the spaceship Earth, so that man is only seen as an element of the system, as one of many passengers. This touches on the question of which institutions of political will and decision-making the world society needs, in view of the great transformation required.

In this context, one desideratum of the current degrowth discourse may be that the inter-, trans-, and above all the supranational dimension of political legitimacy and decision-making is too rarely considered. For example, the discussions about a "United Nations Parliamentary Assembly",¹¹ which were probably not coincidentally revived at the same time as growth-critical perspectives regained momentum in the wake of the global economic crisis, or the idea of a "world parliament" put forward by Jürgen Habermas, which would represent both the world's citizens and all states at the same time.¹² This does not mean that the great transformation can take place top-down, or even that it should take place exclusively in this way. But in so far as the Earth represents an intricate system that is similar to a spaceship, whose ecological stabilization for the avoidance of a "systemic collapse"¹³ represents a problem that can only be solved supranationally, it is probably necessary, firstly, to finally (re-)control the economic world system adequately again, which has been operating transnationally for a long time, and secondly, to achieve the necessary realization of supranational institutions through a fair distribution of resources and living conditions between the currently competing nation states.

Tools for the supranational control of financial and economic systems are of particular importance in this context, such as the proposal of a world central bank (International Clearing Union), presented by John Maynard Keynes at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, which, among other things, would impose punitive interest rates on (foreign trade) surpluses of states.¹⁴ However, all ideas of a consistent supranational socialisation must always be discussed against the background of democratic legitimation problems - i.e. along the question of the future design of democratic procedures.

About (radical) democracy

This touches upon the question of how such a world social-cosmopolitan-terrestrial position can be transformed into concrete political institutions. In this context, it is important to recognize that the guiding ideas of the new grand narrative - "acceptance of ecological limits", "trans- and intra-societal redistribution", and "good living despite the inevitable shrinking of GDP in the global North" - can in principle also be compatible with totalitarian political

¹¹ Andreas Brummel, Auf dem Weg zu einem Weltparlament?, in: Vereinte Nationen, 5/2010, pp. 216-220.

¹² Habermas would also consider a bicameral system possible, the first chamber of which would be elected and legitimized by the citizens of the world and the second chamber of which - comparable to the German Bundesrat - would be composed of representatives of the governments of the nation states (Jürgen Habermas, Konstitutionalisierung des Völkerrechts und die Legitimationsprobleme einer verfassten Weltgesellschaft, in: Winfried Brugger et al. (eds.), Rechtsphilosophie im 21. Jahrhundert, Frankfurt/M. 2008, pp. 360-379.

¹³ Donella Meadows et al., Limits to Growth. The 30-years update, White River Junction, Vermont 2013.

¹⁴ Ann Petifor, Die Produktion des Geldes, Hamburg 2018.

systems. Or to put it differently: Campaigners for a major transformation or a new narrative will have to actively work for the preservation and expansion of democratic procedures, since there is no reason to assume that democratic renewal would automatically result from a transformation of the economic growth premise to a degrowth perspective.

Conversely, however, there is much to suggest that democratic renewal will be a necessary precondition for the success of the grand transformation and for breaking the current political and socio-psychological domination of the growth dogma - namely, in a comprehensive sense, as a re-politicization of citizens and their everyday, municipal and local actions, and as the formation of parliamentary and political representation of the degrowth movement.

In addition to the need for democratic legitimation and problem-solving procedures at the global social level already outlined, there is broad agreement in the degrowth debate that as many decisions as possible should be taken in local contexts. Examples include the democratisation of companies, the direct participation of citizens in local decisions, experiments with randomocracy democracy,¹⁵ and the positive experiences of the Spanish Indignados or the South African-based Ubuntu movement with direct, consensus-oriented democracy.¹⁶

The analysis of the discourses in this regard also reveals the fundamental mistrust of many participants in the debate towards the state, which is not understood there as a representative of society, but rather as an independent power in the guise of a "merely formal", supposedly "representative democracy".¹⁷ This criticism of liberal, representative democracy is combined with ideas of a "radical" democracy, which aims first and foremost at the democratization of all life-world and state institutions.

Little, if any, attention is paid to the considerations of comparative political science, for example, on the advantages and disadvantages of institutions based on consensus and competition democracy, systems of concordance, the tyranny of the majority, the challenges of protecting minorities, the advantages of a system of subsidiarity and, above all, the importance of education for democracy. However, if the degree of legitimacy of democratic institutions depends on the quality of opinion-forming and will-forming deliberation among citizens,¹⁸ the aspect of education has a key function.

In other words: Whoever wants a great transformation, the core of which is democracy and protection of the ecosphere, must shake off the "fear of the wild masses"¹⁹ and share knowledge about the basic facts of the world situation beyond the scientific and civil society elites. Entirely in the spirit of the "New Enlightenment" demanded by more and more

¹⁵ Erik Olin Wright, Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias, in: American Sociological Review, Vol. 78:1, 2012, pp. 1-25.

¹⁶ Ulf Bohmann und Barbara Muraca, Demokratische Transformation als Transformation der Demokratie: Postwachstum und radikale Demokratie, in: AK Postwachstum (ed.), Wachstum – Krise und Kritik, Frankfurt/Main 2016, pp. 289-311; Ubuntu Planet, One Small Town, <https://ubuntuplanet.org/one-small-town> .

¹⁷ Bohmann und Muraca, Demokratische Transformation, ibid.

¹⁸ Habermas, Konstitutionalisierung des Völkerrechts, ibid.

¹⁹ In German: "Angst vor den wilden Massen" cf. Bohmann und Muraca, Demokratische Transformation, ibid., p. 299.

scientists,²⁰ the still predominantly sceptical people could thus be enabled to become part of this movement of their own free will.

The crisis of political education

In short, the seeds of the crisis of democracy are probably not only to be found in economic inequality, but also in a correlating crisis of political education. Those who do not understand the processes of a complex world and at the same time feel economically unrepresented by state institutions are hardly inclined to defend representative democracy.

However, a degrowth movement can only achieve its goals under democratic conditions if people can understand the global economic-ecological-political crisis correlations. Thus, in addition to the democratization of decision-making processes, education must also be democratized. Only when these two goals have been achieved and knowledge of the connections between inequality, the crisis of democracy, the quest for growth and the ecological crisis has been democratised does the democratic control of capital flows appear possible - in the sense of a genuine say in a fairer distribution and a truly sustainable allocation of capital that is both ecologically and economically wiser. However, all this will probably only be possible in the future on a trans- and supranational basis, since the ecological crisis of the planet makes a rapid political communitization of humanity necessary. In particular, the crucial question of distributive justice and the associated challenge of (re-)controlling the economic system can probably only be answered supranationally and in terms of world society. However, these arguments are so presuppositional and so far removed from the hitherto dominant logic of inter-state as well as intra-societal competition and the striving for growth that it undoubtedly requires massive effort to convince people of the advantages of a supranational, world-social constitution.

Social science as Vita Activa

In the sense of a renewal of democracy, the above-mentioned challenges can only be met by those social forces that have the four decisive resources for this: Knowledge, public access, democratic spirit and non-partisanship.

A social group which, by and large, does have these resources and whose professional obligation is to fulfil this educational task is, however, extremely reluctant to take on this issue - apart from a few exceptions which have always existed – namely: the group of (social) scientists. If there is no lack of non-partisanship and democratic convictions, it remains to be clarified, in view of the obvious crisis of political education, which of the other two prerequisites is missing - whether science has too little knowledge or access to the public is blocked.

²⁰ Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker und Anders Wijkman et al. (ed.), *Wir sind dran*, München 2017.

Leaving aside the above-mentioned lack of supradisciplinary thinking, the social sciences have extremely plausible knowledge of the causes, connections, effects and potential solutions to the current multiple crisis. A central problem could therefore ultimately turn out to be that social scientists are oddly reluctant to seek contact with the public at all and to communicate the knowledge they have acquired in a language that is generally understandable.

The inner-academic regulations governing the granting of recognition could be responsible for this. This hardly rewards the turn towards the larger society, but publishing in journals read by only a few reviewers and fellows is strongly rewarded. It even tends to punish communication with the larger society, since "good science" does not seek the limelight and public applause. The imagined "audience" of social science argumentation and deliberation is therefore still first and foremost the community of scientists. But how can such exclusive communication contribute to the democratization of the larger society?

The phenomenon of aversion to publicity described here may be related to the special significance of the position of value neutrality, generally associated with Max Weber, for the collective identity of the social sciences.²¹ However, the Humean idea of a strict differentiation of "is / is not" and "ought / ought not" statements reproduced there, the sterile separation of scientific thinking laboratories from the supposedly objectivity-destroying social values, and the strict distinction between science and politics lead to a fatal reluctance to communicate existing social science interpretations of the world to the public. It is probably the most important task of the social sciences to share their findings with the public and to do so in a way that allows even non-experts to understand and evaluate them.

The social sciences could take the primarily scientific association Scientists for Future as an example. This association does not shy away from intervening in the "Fridays for Future" debate with its expertise in a generally understandable way.

Making available one's own, acquired knowledge about social (mis)developments is the public good that the social sciences should produce in order to support democracy and enable citizens to lead a politically effective "active life" in the sense of Hannah Arendt. The strange fear of exchange with society, the retreat into the seclusion of the scientific community, the comfortable clinging to the epistemologically hardly ever plausible idea of value neutrality,²² on the other hand, today mean failure and irresponsibility of the social sciences.

Weber's postulate may have served not least to ward off the influence of the monarchist state on the thinking laboratories. In a democratic state, however, science no longer needs such a defense mechanism, since in many countries the freedom of science enjoys constitutional status.

Conversely, value neutrality turns into a refusal to defend democracy. In any case, the degrowth movement needs the support of the social sciences in its simultaneous efforts to renew democracy and balance economic desires and ecological realities. The will to become

²¹ Max Weber, Die „Objektivität“ sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis“, in: Max Weber. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre, Tübingen 1988.

²² Richard Rudner, Der Wissenschaftler qua Wissenschaftler fällt Werturteile, in: Gerhard Schurz und Martin Carrier (Hg.), Werte in den Wissenschaften, Berlin 2013, pp. 233-251.

politically active for certain values beyond party functions and to explore the paths of a new (world) society is part of the self-liberation from political paralysis and passivity also of the social sciences. Anyone who wants to be free of values in this respect separates science from society and believes in a right life in the wrong one [in German: “richtiges Leben im Falschen”, cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*] - to the detriment of our democracy.