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## Introduction article

### Who promotes sustainability? Five Theses on the Relationships Between the Degrowth and the Environmental Justice Movements

**Bengi Akbulut<sup>1</sup>, Federico Demaria<sup>2,3</sup>, Julien-François Gerber<sup>3</sup>, Joan Martínez-Alier<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Environmental Science and Technology, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Bellaterra, Spain

<sup>3</sup> International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, Netherlands

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**Abstract:** Environmental destructions, overconsumption and overdevelopment are felt by an increasing number of people. Voices for ‘prosperity without growth’ have strengthened and environmental conflicts are on the rise worldwide. This introduction to the special issue explores the possibility of an alliance between post-growth and ecological distribution conflicts (EDCs). It argues that among the various branches of post-growth and EDCs, degrowth and environmental justice (EJ) movements have the best potential to interconnect. This claim is discussed via five ‘theses’: We argue that both degrowth and EJ movements are materialist but also more than just materialist in scope (thesis I) and both seek a politico-metabolic reconfiguration of our economies (thesis II). We also show that both degrowth and EJ seek consequential as well as deontological justice (thesis III) and they are complementary: while EJ has not developed a unified and broader theoretical roadmap, degrowth has largely failed to connect with a wider social movement (thesis IV). Finally, both degrowth and EJ stress the contradiction between capitalist accumulation vs. conditions of social reproduction (rather than that between capital and labour) (thesis V). We conclude that an alliance between degrowth and EJ is not only possible but necessary.

**Keywords:** post-growth, environmental conflicts, ecological distribution conflict, environmental politics

#### Introduction

A spectre is haunting the overdeveloped world – the spectre of degrowth. This rephrasing of the famous first sentence of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) might soon become as accurate a description of the sway of degrowth as it was for communism when Marx and Engels wrote their

manifesto.<sup>1</sup> One does not need to search too long before ending up with a rather sombre view, to say the least, of the current state of the global environment: essential resources such as oil are peaking; absorption capacities of the atmosphere and the oceans are overdrawn; and growth rates in industrialized countries are declining or stagnating while some large countries such as China and India have been doubling their GDPs every ten years (Steffen et al., 2011).

Within this context, overconsumption and overdevelopment are being acknowledged as problems by an increasing portion of the world's population and new voices for 'prosperity without growth' or even for degrowth have strengthened (Drews et al., 2019). For instance, in September 2018 over 200 scientists penned a letter titled "Europe, It's Time to End the Growth Dependency" to the European institutions, which was later signed by almost 100,000 citizens.<sup>2</sup> In addition, various forms of conflict over access to natural resources, the burdens of pollution and the use of ecosystem services are on the rise worldwide. Yet, how to address and locate the meaning and potential of such social movements over the environment remains a pertinent task. Is there a collective alternative vision emerging from the millions of people involved in environmental conflicts worldwide? Are they indeed the 'natural' promoters and practitioners of more sustainable economies? Do they represent the much sought-after 'political subject' of the global environmental movement?

While the answers to these questions remain, of course, ambivalent and open to debate, it is both possible and increasingly necessary to explore them. We argue that such an exploration is of urgency for ecological economics. Calls for a radical rethinking of economic growth have a long tradition within ecological economics (Daly, 1973, 1996; Georgescu-Roegen, 1971; Norgaard, 1994; Victor, 2008). Not only have the pioneering contributions on limits to growth and alternative conceptions of well-being come from ecological economists, but the very questioning of economic growth has in fact been a constitutive element of the field. This has been paralleled with the study of the uneven distribution of its costs and benefits. This has given rise to the development and articulation of key concepts such as social metabolism, valuation languages, cost-shifting, ecologically unequal exchange, and ecological debt by ecological economists, some of which are in turn imported and used by environmental activists (Healy et al., 2013). The intellectual roots and foundations of ecological economics thus make it more than well suited for exploring the links between degrowth and environmental justice.

Martínez-Alier (2012), for example, was possibly the first author to identify a clear link between such conflicts and a radical alternative to the existing economic regime, namely the post-growth project: "[Environmental Justice Organizations] are potential allies of the environmental groups in rich countries that criticize the obsession with the narrow economic measure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth [...]. These groups form the degrowth movement [...], whose origins partly lie in the field of ecological economics". Our objective in this article is elaborating on this observation. That is to say, we aim to explore the relationships between the (still largely intellectual) post-growth

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<sup>1</sup> Remember that the Paris Commune took place in 1871 and the Soviet revolution in Russia in 1917, only 69 years after 1848!

<sup>2</sup> The letter translated into 20 languages can be found here: <https://degrowth.org/2018/09/06/post-growth-open-letter>. The petition is available here: <https://you.wemove.eu/campaigns/europe-it-s-time-to-end-the-growth-dependency> (both accessed on 16 January 2019).

movement and the mounting (grassroots) environmental conflicts that are allegedly giving rise to a global movement for environmental justice (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016).

We will do so by discussing five propositions – or ‘theses’ – that summarize the key aspects of the organic relationship between degrowth and environmental justice (hereafter EJ) movements. We will demonstrate, in particular, that the EJ and the degrowth movements are materialist but also more than just materialist in scope (thesis I) and that both degrowth and EJ seek a politico-metabolic reconfiguration of our economies (thesis II). Perhaps more fundamentally, we will argue that both degrowth and EJ seek consequential as well as deontological justice (thesis III). In fact, it rapidly turns out that degrowth and EJ are deeply complementary: EJ has not developed a unified and broader theoretical roadmap while degrowth has largely failed so far to connect with a wider social movement (thesis IV).

A brief comparison of the degrowth-EJ alliance with Marxism will be attempted, too, as the latter can be seen as the movement of the twentieth century that built, even with all its shortcomings and blind spots, the most successful bridge between social theory and political practice. Whereas Marxism emphasizes the contradiction between capital and labour within processes of (re)production, both degrowth and EJ, in contrast, stress the contradiction between capitalist growth versus living conditions in the community (thesis V). This leaves room for alliances with a larger number of economic actors than only wage-workers.

In what follows, after a definition and a contextualization of the main concepts used throughout the text, we will discuss the five propositions we put forward to illustrate why an alliance between degrowth and EJ is not only possible but also necessary, before concluding with some remarks.

### **Some preliminary clarifications**

Before elaborating further on our theses, we will connect both degrowth and environmental justice movements to their broader scientific context, and specifically to the field of ecological economics.

The ‘post-growth’ or ‘beyond growth’ research agenda has become one of the major contributions of ecological economics over the past few decades (Daly, 1991; Kallis et al., 2018). It has generated substantial research and differentiated into three main currents: degrowth, a-growth, and steady-state economics. The first of them, degrowth, not only challenges the hegemony of growth, but also calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialised countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice and well-being (Martínez-Alier, 2009; D’Alisa et al., 2013; Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017). It is usually associated with the idea that smaller can be beautiful. However, the emphasis should not only be on less: degrowth promotes societies with smaller metabolisms, but more importantly, societies with metabolisms that are different, more egalitarian and more sustainable (D’Alisa et al., 2014). Degrowth was launched into the political arena as a provocative slogan by environmental activists in the

beginning of the 2000s and it soon became a social movement and a concept debated in academic circles.<sup>3</sup>

The second current, a-growth, is 'agnostic' about growth: it promotes carefully-defined sustainable and welfare objectives, but whether these objectives require more growth is seen as irrelevant (van den Bergh, 2011). Finally, steady-state economics supports non-growing economies based on a constant material and energy throughput as well as stable populations (Daly, 1991). Among these three different currents, we will specifically focus on degrowth because we think degrowth has the greatest potential to be transformative and extended into a social movement (Demaria et al., 2013). For instance, by December 2018, the degrowth network included over 100 organizations with 3,000 active members, mostly located in Europe but also in North and South America, the Philippines, Tunisia, Turkey, etc.<sup>4</sup>

The term 'ecological distribution conflict' (hereafter EDC), coined by Martínez-Alier and O'Connor (1996), has subsequently become a central concept both in ecological economics and political ecology. It denotes social conflicts arising not only over the unequal distribution of environmental benefits, such as access to natural resources and ecosystem services, but also those over unequal and unsustainable allocations of environmental burdens, such as pollution or waste. EDCs typically contest activities and projects like new roads, airports, dams, nuclear power stations, mines, plantations, fossil fuel extraction, landfills or incinerators for waste disposal, urban pollution (Temper et al., 2015; Martínez-Alier et al., 2016; Scheidel et al. 2018; see the Environmental Justice Atlas for an inventory of almost 3,000 EDCs, [www.ejatl.org](http://www.ejatl.org)). EDCs can – and do – overlap with agrarian conflicts over land resources and with labour movements over the environmental conditions of work. They may thus overlap with conflicts based on gender, race, class or caste differences.

EDCs could be differentiated into three broad branches: environmental justice movements, environmental conflicts, and NIMBY (not in my backyard) mobilizations. EJ movements include an ethical or moral dimension that goes beyond environmental conflicts merely involving distributional aspects. While EJ movements typically problematize issues of participation, power and recognition (Schlosberg, 2013), what we call here 'environmental conflicts' usually focus on a single issue and do not explicitly include questions of social justice, nor a quest for broader societal alternatives. They do not (yet) form organized networks and use common slogans. Finally, the NIMBY label, first used in the United States, implies that people have narrow, selfish, misinformed, emotional and/or irrational views of the situation (Burningham, 2000). While the term is often used as a way to discredit activists, NIMBY attitudes can also be seen as an essential starting point and an on-going component of full-fledged social movements. It may, for example, turn out that NIMBY protesters have actually a good grasp of hazards ignored by authorities, thereby serving a broader public interest. Hence NIMBY protests may and do turn (in the parlance of the EJ movement of the USA) into NIABY movements: not in anyone's backyard. In this article, we will focus on EJ movements because this current is, among the three, the current that has the greatest potential for social transformation and for connecting with degrowth.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ça va sans dire*, it should not be understood in its literal meaning, a decrease of GDP, since that phenomenon has already a name in economics: it is called a recession.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.degrowth.info/en/map> (accessed on 16 January 2019).

We propose to compare degrowth and EJ as two social movements. Della Porta and Diani (2012: 20) argue that “social movements are a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action: are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; share a distinct collective identity”. Degrowth and EJ might be loosely organized and differ in size, but they are characterized by these definitional elements. With a diverse repertoire of collective action, they sustain campaigns in support of socio-environmental goals related to a change in society’s structure, value and/or ecologies. Both have also become academic concepts that are part of larger research agendas (i.e. post-growth and EDCs), but only ex-post, as examples of activist-led science.

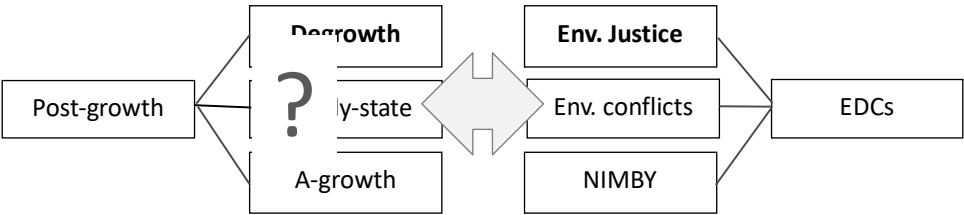


Fig. 1: What are the links between post-growth proposals and EDCs?

Figure 1 structures the research question of our article: what are the connecting points between post-growth and EDCs; more specifically, between degrowth and EJ? What brings them together or pulls them apart? Why an alliance between the two would be desirable from a social justice and sustainability perspective? How could such an alliance be articulated? These are of course analytical but also strongly normative questions. In the next section, we will discuss our five theses on their articulation.

**Thesis I: The EJ and the degrowth movements are both materialist and non-materialist in scope**

What is the main motive behind EJ and degrowth? The quality, quantity and distribution of environmental burdens and benefits are obviously among the prime movers of these movements, albeit to different extents depending on the cases. In our understanding, this characteristic would correspond to what some sociologists have labelled ‘old’ social movements, as they mainly refer to ownership, distribution and material issues (e.g. Touraine, 1981; Della Porta and Diani, 2006).

In the industrialized world of the 1960s, the environmental movement was largely born from very ‘material’ concerns, such as the risk of nuclear energy and other health issues related to the ‘green revolution’ (e.g. Carson, 1962). Contrary to Ronald Inglehart’s thesis, there is nothing ‘post-material’ about such concerns (Inglehart, 1990). Inglehart considered ‘materialist’ concerns those related to money incomes and employment (i.e. working-class ‘old’ social movements), and called ‘post-materialist’ the concerns on other more salient issues after 1968 such as human rights, women rights, environmental issues, typically manifested in the growth of organizations such as Amnesty and Greenpeace (i.e. middle-class ‘new’ social movements). But ‘post-materialism’ was a misnomer, as DDT and nuclear radiation implied very material risks.

These theories on social movements focused mainly on the Global North, but different political geographies need to be considered. In the Global South, far from being the typical concerns of the rich, some environmental issues also mobilize – and perhaps more so – the poor, the indigenous, and their supporters, because of their need to maintain direct and often customary channels of access to natural resources and services for livelihood purposes (Martínez-Alier, 2002). Opposing, for instance, eucalyptus plantations (called ‘green deserts’ in Brazil) because of their high consumption of water, as evidenced in many places around the world (Gerber, 2011), is a ‘materialist’ position; as is opposing open cast mining of coal, copper or gold or oil exploration and drilling, such as those in the Niger Delta or the Amazon territory in Ecuador (under the slogan ‘leave oil in the soil’ promoted by Oilwatch since 1997).

Material concerns – in agreement with ‘old’ social movements – have similarly occupied a central place in the texts of the founding figures of degrowth (e.g. Gorz, Castoriadis, Georgescu-Roegen, Daly). In response to the worsening of the environmental crisis in general, and the seminal ‘Limits to Growth’ report (1972) in particular, these authors started to develop what seemed like the most realistic answer to the new situation: the selective downscaling of production and consumption in order to reach a smaller social metabolism that would be organized differently (see thesis II).

Having said this, it would be a mistake to characterize EJ and degrowth as contesting exclusively – or even primarily – the material conditions of production and reproduction. The different languages of valuation used and developed by EJ movements around the world are not limited to material and economic concerns and include cultural, ethical, aesthetic and spiritual elements (Martínez-Alier, 2002). The widespread call in Latin America for the right to hold local consultations or referendums against mining or fossil fuels projects, appealing to local democracy and/or indigenous territorial rights, combines concerns for avoiding damage to local land and water resources with a proud display of autonomy (Urkidi and Walter, 2011; Walter and Urkidi, 2017). Likewise, the degrowth movement is also concerned with notions such as autonomy, democracy and conviviality that extend much beyond the mere material. These aspects, we argue, correspond to the characteristics of ‘new’ social movement.

Cultural resistance to hegemonic actors is an important motivation for many EJ movements, and so is the people’s inner relationship to specific places/resources identified as sacred. In some cases, such as First Nations protests in North America, these movers may even be more effective in mobilizing local people against extractive industries or commercial monocultures than the actual impacts on their livelihoods (see Frost, this special issue). In a parallel way, degrowth is not simply proposing a reduction of metabolic flows in order to address the ecological crisis. It also advocates nothing less than a cultural revolution, which – unlike the Maoist forerunner – would aim a redefinition of the ‘good life’ towards forms of voluntary simplicity, the return to the ‘essential’, and the possibilities for non-material quests, e.g. having more time for relational, political, caring, artistic or intellectual pursuits. In the same line, Latouche (2009) emphasized the need to ‘decolonize the imaginary’.

The broader existential dimension of EJ and degrowth can be observed again and again. Already in 1956, for example, Walter Weiskopf criticized Erich Fromm’s *Sane Society* for not addressing the growth question (although he overall very much liked the book), and asked: “Do we want that

fantastic degree of material splendor which – at least in the United States – industrial technology has provided? In this case we must put up with an ‘alienated’ mode of life. Or shall we lower our material standards in favor of a more integrated existence which permits a realization of those human faculties and values which have to be repressed in industrial society?” (Weisskopf, 1956). This represents an early and very explicitly existential-psychological critique of growth.

This existential critique of growth within EJ and degrowth is also apparent in the involvement of progressive spiritual figures in both movements. The illusory pursuit of materialism is a recurrent theme across religious traditions worldwide. Gandhi, for example, is a well-known source of inspiration for both Indian EJ movements and degrowth activists. Moreover, a number of key degrowth (proto-)theorists were in fact actively engaged in their own spiritual pursuits (e.g. Thoreau, Tolstoy, Kumarappa, Illich, Schumacher). The language of sacredness often appears in EJ conflicts and in cases of deaths of ‘environmental defenders’, such as Berta Caceres in Honduras on 2 March 2016, defending a river sacred to her Lenca community against a hydroelectric project.

EJ movements and the degrowth proposals thus have both a materialist and non-materialist agenda (see Alcock, this special issue; Domazet and Ančić, this special issue; Frost, this special issue; Pérez et al., this special issue). Both portray a combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements, engaging in ‘old’ and ‘new’ structural conflicts (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). Put in the Marxist terminology, one could say that while most mobilizations may start in the (material) base of economic relations of (re)production, they rapidly level up to incorporate the (cultural) superstructure as well: it is not only the people’s biophysical (exterior) relationship to natural resources that shapes such mobilizations, but also their psychological-spiritual (interior) relationship to them, as linked to their values, beliefs and emotional life.

## **Thesis II: Both the degrowth and the EJ movements seek a politico-metabolic reconfiguration towards more sustainability**

Let us focus here on the two movements as forces for ecological sustainability, a key element of their *raison d’être*. Ecological sustainability depends on the interactions of humans with biogeochemical cycles and is best understood using a socio-metabolic lens. Akin to the study of the metabolism of living organisms by physiologists, ecological economists study the metabolism of societies (Fischer-Kowalski, 1998). The metabolic analogy is rooted in the observation that biological systems (organisms, ecosystems) and socioeconomic systems (human economies, companies, households, cities) decisively depend on a continuous throughput of energy and materials in order to maintain their internal structure (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl, 2007). Therefore, the concept of social metabolism refers to the processes of appropriation, transformation and disposal of materials and energy by society in order to maintain itself and evolve (Scheidel and Sorman, 2012).<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, different societies have distinct metabolisms, which sometimes coexist and are always changing over time. For instance, Fuente-Carrasco et al. (this special issue) analyse a new form of

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<sup>5</sup> Methods such as Material and Energy Flow Accounting (MEFA) or Multi-Scale Integrated Analysis of Societal and Ecosystem Metabolism (MuSIASEM) aim at quantify the social metabolism (Gerber and Scheidel, 2018).

bottom-up water governance by indigenous communities in Mexico, called *comunalidad*. These metabolisms can be characterized both by their *biophysical dimension*, i.e. the amount and composition of materials and energy they consume, and their *social, political and economic dimension*, i.e. their political economy and the institutions that define the sources and types of extraction, as well as the distribution and disposal of materials and energy across the members of a given society. Unfortunately, however, socio-metabolic studies often lack a politico-institutional dimension (Gerber and Scheidel, 2018), while many EJ activists do not often discern the socio-metabolic foundations of the systems they fight. Filling both of these gaps would affine understandings and effectiveness on both sides (see Domazet and Ančić, this special issue; Fuente-Carrasco et al., this special issue; Pérez et al., this special issue; Weber et al., this special issue).

We use the term ‘socio-metabolic configurations’ to refer to both the politico-institutional and the biophysical dimensions of a society’s metabolism (Demaria and Schindler, 2016). For instance, the metabolization of waste involves the production, throughput and processing of waste (see Weber et al., this special issue). The materiality relates to the composition, quantity and calorific value of waste. The political economy concerns the how, where, and by whom it is managed (private, public or informal sector; recycling, incineration or landfill). To understand the implications for the sustainability of the social metabolism, one must not only look into the quantification of metabolic flows but also into the power relations that shape metabolisms, i.e. into the political economy. Ultimately, the coevolution of materiality and political economy (including social and institutional dynamics) transforms/shapes metabolisms and as a result political opportunities are fostered or foreclosed.

Our thesis is that both the degrowth and the EJ movements seek to modify the social metabolism, and hence the politico-institutional structure that govern it, in order to reach a higher levels of ecological sustainability. Changes in socio-metabolic configurations are directly linked to EDCs (Martínez-Alier, 2002; Martínez-Alier et al., 2010; Muradian et al., 2012; Pérez et al., this special issue). Such conflicts do not only contest the magnitude of different material flows (e.g. increased extraction), but also the given political economy of these flows. It is thus likely that EDCs can potentially promote a reconfiguration leading to more sustainable economies. In this sense, the EJ movement could be an organic ally of post-growth proposals.

Indeed, as we have seen, degrowth not only promotes “the reduction of energy and material throughput, needed in order to face the existing biophysical constraints (in terms of natural resources and ecosystem’s assimilative capacity)” (Demaria et al., 2013: 209); it is also a political project that seeks more democracy, equality and justice. In the same vein, Cattaneo and Gavalda (2010) criticized a limited understanding of degrowth based solely on metabolism reduction in terms of material and energy flows. They argued instead that the degrowth project is fundamentally a democratizing process, namely a collective choice for a better living, and not an imperative imposed by an external authority. In other words, we see degrowth and EJ movements as both political and ecological projects at their core.



### **Thesis III: Both degrowth and EJ seek justice, consequentially as well as deontologically**

Since the basis of an alliance between degrowth and EJ is the politicization of the social metabolism beyond a nominal reduction of it, both movements can be seen as rephrasing the question of sustainability, by now rendered bereft of its political content, in order to ask what is to be sustained, how and for whom (see Dengler and Seebacher, this special issue; Gabriel and Bond, this special issue; Perkin, this special issue; Velicu, this special issue; Weber et al., this special issue).

The centrality of justice might appear more obvious in the case of the EJ movement, as it builds – since its origins in the United States in the 1980s (Bullard, 1990) – on the disproportionate shouldering of environmental burdens (toxic pollution, degradation) by the ethnically/racially marginalized and the poor. In the EJ movement, claims for climate justice and for water justice have been explicitly made, together with complaints against land grabbing. There is a large, common vocabulary of the global EJ movement emphasizing the theme of justice (Martínez-Alier et al., 2014). For instance, the concept of ‘just sustainabilities’ simultaneously addresses environmental quality and human equality (Agyeman et al., 2003).

Yet justice is no less a fundamental basis for the degrowth movement (Demaria et al., 2013). In a nutshell, the latter advocates both the degrowth *of* injustice and degrowth *for* justice. Not only does the degrowth movement seek a socio-ecologically just society and an equitable transition towards it, but it recognizes that injustice is one of the main drivers of growth, both as a discursive/political tool and as a material process. On the one hand, inequality in consumption and relative poverty can motivate consumerism; on the other hand, in the absence of broad-based redistribution, growth is often accepted as the only way of addressing injustice under the assumption that its benefits will trickle down to the poor.

In turn, degrowth aims to address injustice as a driver of growth, by its proposals for both reducing existing income and wealth inequalities and tackling past injustices. On the one hand, degrowth proposals such as income ceilings and wealth caps can help weaken the strength of social comparison and envy as motors of consumerism and growth (Demaria et al., 2013). On the other hand, degrowth situates historical inequalities across and within countries as a fundamental cause of the growth imperative, both in the North and the South. As such, it brings debates on ecological debt and climate justice to the fore of degrowth and advocates a large-scale resource and wealth redistribution both within and between the North and the South.

The claims around the ecological debt and the recognition of environmental liabilities may be seen as an effort by the ecological creditors for acquiring more money to spend. But as often remarked in the international movement for the repayment of the ecological debt, a main purpose of these claims is rather to stop the rise of such ecological debt any further (Warlenius, 2015). If the state of Bolivia or the small islands in the Pacific, for instance, could go to an international court claiming damages from climate change, the recognition of the right to sue, itself, and the intolerable moral harm thus afflicted would be more important than the actual payment of debt in a “polluter pays” framework.

This highlights an understanding of justice in a more comprehensive way than its conventional (e.g. outcome-based) understandings. Indeed, a notion of justice that surpasses the duality between the

consequential vs. deontological understandings is implicit within both EJ and degrowth; it is the insistence of seeking justice both consequentially (i.e. focusing on the consequences or results of an action) and deontologically (i.e. focusing on judging the actions themselves) that better illuminates the ground of alliance around justice between EJ and degrowth.

Here we stress, firstly, that justice is not only associated with the distribution of given outcomes (such as various indicators of social, economic or ecological well-being), but rather includes the questions of recognition, difference, and participation. EJ struggles in particular have informed an understanding of justice beyond the fair distribution of environmental burdens and benefits to encompass, for instance, recognitional and procedural justice. While recognitional justice refers to the recognition of the identity and rights of disadvantaged groups that suffer from environmental injustice, procedural justice is related more broadly to various processes and scales of decision-making (Schlosberg, 2003; Cook and Swyngedouw, 2012). Furthermore, this understanding incorporates such separate fields of justice as inter-related and interdependent dimensions, where none can be pursued in isolation.

Through the concepts of recognition and decision-making, EJ in fact problematizes the dynamics and processes that lead to unjust outcomes, i.e. means of achieving ends. In that sense, EJ operationalizes a deontological understanding of justice in addition to the consequential one: while it highlights the uneven distribution of environmental burdens to be borne by the ethnically/racially marginalized and the poor, it locates this as a part of the broader unjust processes of political recognition and participation, and thus politicises the consequential injustice by revealing the processes by which it is sustained. In fact, Bullard and Johnson (2000) defined EJ as the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies”.

This resonates with degrowth’s insistence on justice in both consequentialist and deontological aspects. Degrowth emphasises the historically unequal relationship between the Global North and the South, by the former’s disproportionate appropriation of resources through systems of economic and ecologically unequal trade (Hornborg, 1998) and disproportionate use of environmental sinks for greenhouse gases. It thus sheds light on the historical processes and relationships that not only leads to injustice but also fuels the growth imperative. In doing so, degrowth, like EJ, traverses the duality between consequential vs. deontological justice and enlarges the concept of justice.

To recap, both EJ and degrowth extends the consequential understanding of justice (i.e. means over ends) to incorporate the processes and dynamics that organize (in)justice (i.e. ends over means). Moreover, both embrace justice not only in environmental burdens and benefits, but more broadly in historical, economic (wealth, income), political (rights, participation) and social (identities, recognition) terms. This implies a notion to justice as a process that needs to be constantly organized and a specific attention to the institutional interventions that can be proposed to this end. In this special issue, Gabriel and Bond take this thesis even further: they develop a Need-Entitlement-Desert framework and propose seven justice-based principles for redistribution under degrowth demonstrating that degrowth, like EJ, seeks consequential as well as deontological justice, underscoring their deep complementarity.

#### **Thesis IV: Degrowth and EJ are complementary – EJ lacks a broader theoretical roadmap while degrowth lacks a wider movement**

Beyond their similarities, EJ and degrowth are also in many ways complementary (see Alcock, this special issue; Domazet and Ančić, this special issue; Fuente-Carrasco et al., this special issue; Velicu, this special issue; Dengler and Seebacher, this special issue). In a nutshell, EJ provides a large-scale force of resistance and degrowth theorizes a way out.

There is no doubt that taken as a whole, the myriads of EDCs represent one of the most powerful socio-political forces in the Global South today. Martínez-Alier (2002: 1) even compared the current explosion of EJ struggles with the beginning of the socialist movement and the First International. What is more, the general occurrence of such conflicts is on the rise, as the metabolism of industrialized regions requires ever more energy and materials and as the commodity frontier advances spatially as well as structurally.

However, this political-practical strength has so far failed to translate into an equal strength in theoretical production, despite the fact that many creative concepts have been forged through EJ activism, such as ecological debt, climate justice, environmentalism of the poor, biopiracy, and indigenous territorial rights (Martínez-Alier et al., 2014). There seems to be no common theoretical basis to what has been called the global EJ movement (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016).

This is not to say that EJ movements lack conceptual frameworks within which the dynamics and relationships they emerge from are interpreted. Sarayaku's resistance in Ecuador's Amazon against oil exploration is a well-known example, as this community became the cradle of the recent use of the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir*, which was then incorporated to the new Constitution of the country. A Gandhian worldview has been mobilized in India, or particular cosmologies can be invoked for advocating a just order in indigenous lands. Yet, overall, many grassroots EJ movements remain local or regional in their conceptual scope – which can be both a strength and a weakness. Concepts like food sovereignty (from Via Campesina) or, more recently, energy democracy or energy sovereignty, have the potential to become universal.

This conceptual fragmentation can nevertheless obstruct wider synergies that can potentially be produced and the broader societal alternatives that can be imagined and constructed. In contrast, the labour movement, for instance, has given rise to rich (and at times competing) theoretical traditions, which could nourish debates and political strategies. The same applies to the feminist movement, which is decentralized and at times fiercely divided, yet more effective than the labour (and the EJ) movement.

This is where the contribution of degrowth can be crucial. The degrowth movement has largely been an intellectual endeavour so far, albeit with numerous local experiments; but a good theory can be a powerful weapon for fostering understanding and action. We would therefore like to briefly review some of the key degrowth ideas applicable to EJ movements.

One basic starting point of degrowth is the ‘impossibility theorem’, i.e., that the mass consumption economy of the West for a world of 7.5 billion people is neither possible nor desirable (Daly, 1991). Against metabolically naïve ‘Green New Dealers’, degrowth reminds us that we still cannot produce renewable energy from renewable energy and reach Western levels of consumption for everyone (Kallis, 2018). We need to downsize the global metabolism, and the proper way to think about this downsizing can only be world-systemic and class-based. Capital has become so mobile that it has been able – with more or less success – to reorganize production worldwide in accordance with profit maximizing opportunities and resource locations. World-system theorists have thus argued that a single transnational global system has emerged, largely governed by a global ruling class who shares similar consumption patterns and a comparable lifestyle (Robinson, 2004). Accordingly, the degrowth critique applies to the global middle and upper classes regardless of their geographical location. As for the ‘global poor’, a post-growth scenario would not only leave them some biophysical space to determine their own futures, but also address the issue of the ecological debt that the ‘global rich’ owe to the rest of the planet.

Regarding the ‘global poor’, the aim of post-growth policies should be wealth redistribution and the fulfilment of basic needs rather than the vague quest for GDP growth per se. But of course, need-based objectives must be the object of in-depth collective discussions (Max-Neef, 1991): what are our needs and who are they for? How can we distinguish ‘real’ needs from detrimental ways of channelling desires (i.e. ‘false consciousness’)? These are essential yet obviously difficult questions that any degrowth project has to tackle (Gerber and Raina, 2018). Furthermore, these questions can only be addressed within the maximum economic, political and cultural autonomy possible – which in fact implies a post-development framework (Demaria and Kothari, 2017).

Yet this does not imply that the complementarities between degrowth and EJ are readily accepted and embraced. Rodríguez-Labajos et al. (this special issue) aim at systematically disclosing main concerns and possible analogies between the scope of action of EJOs in the Global South and the postulates of the degrowth movements in the Global North. Similarly, Dengler and Seebacher and Domazet and Ančić (both in this special issue) show that EJ activists are not automatically supportive of degrowth, and that degrowth advocates should not take their own mental decolonization for granted.

It is often claimed – sometimes by EJ activists themselves – that “we still need growth to fight poverty”. This statement must be carefully examined from a variety of aspects. Who is ‘we’? And what does ‘growth’ really mean at the grassroots? In India, for instance, growth has often been anti-poor (Gerber and Raina, 2018): (i) growth has supported the wealthy rather than the poor: while middle and upper classes experience Western levels of overconsumption, almost 80 percent of the people lives on 20 Rupees per day (USD 0.3); (ii) growth has largely been jobless, especially in the countryside; (iii) far from eradicating poverty, growth needs the poor who crucially provides cheap labour force and cheap land; and (iv) growth creates new poverties, undermining local productive activities and fostering accumulation by dispossession, by contamination and by commodification. Table 1 recapitulates some of the key complementarities between the EJ and the degrowth movements.

Table 1: complementarities between EJ and degrowth.

	<i>EJ movement</i>	<i>Degrowth movement</i>
<i>Size</i>	Huge	Tiny
<i>Main location</i>	'Global South'	'Global North'
<i>Scope</i>	Mainly local, but increasingly deploying global concepts (e.g. climate justice, food sovereignty)	Global, but many local experiments (e.g. degrowth communes, transition towns)
<i>Actors</i>	Lower (and middle) classes, indigenous communities, mainly rural	Middle class, mainly urban
<i>Combativeness</i>	At the grassroots level	At the theoretical level
<i>Weakness</i>	No inclusive theoretical roadmap	No broad popular basis

Referring to Martínez-Alier (2012), Kallis (2018: 179-180) notes that “the small movement for degrowth [...] finds natural allies in movements against extraction and for environmental justice in the Global South (movements that confront in practice, rather than in theory, the growth of the insatiable metabolism that supports the imperial mode of living) as well as among indigenous groups who profess values of sharing, sufficiency and common ownership, in their own language and with their own significations”. This alliance can not only foster socio-political activism but also conceptual cross-fertilization. Concepts that are part of the degrowth vocabulary, like autonomy, simplicity or care, are mobilized in EJ struggles, and vice versa, activist notions such as ecological debt, biopiracy or popular epidemiology are now used by degrowth researchers (Martínez-Alier et al., 2012; 2014).

**Thesis V: Whereas Marxism emphasizes the capital vs. labour contradiction, both degrowth and EJ emphasize the contradiction between capitalist growth vs. conditions of social reproduction**

What is the common political subject of EJ movements and degrowth? James O'Connor (1998: 14, his emphasis) wrote that “issues pertaining to production conditions are class issues (and are also *more* than class issues). This becomes immediately obvious when we ask, who opposes popular struggles over the content of these conditions? The answer is, typically, capital”. Following on this, we argue that both movements are – whether they realize, acknowledge or embrace it or not – struggling against capital. Leonardi (this special issue) argues that EJ resistances are in fact instances of class struggle and that degrowth theory needs to give more attention to such class character. Lower and middle classes are indeed the main social strata of recruitment, so to speak, for both movements, but let us try to be more precise.

Unlike traditional labour movements, EJ and degrowth do not usually focus on the capital vs. labour conflict within processes of (re)production but are rather concerned with the defence of the community, its territory and the environment against capitalist accumulation. In other words, the focus of EJ and degrowth is often less on the conditions of production and more on the conditions of existence and reproduction of society. Therefore, the key system to be defended and/or promoted becomes less a sustainable “mode of economic production”, but a sustainable “mode of socio-ecological reproduction”, broader in scope.

In a similar vein, Burkett (2006: 139, his emphasis) stressed the fact that “the capitalisation and marketisation of natural and social conditions constantly generates new needs, new problems for workers that cannot be adequately addressed by struggles within the wage-labour relation, but rather call for worker-*community*-centred management of communal conditions as conditions of human development. The struggle against capital’s degradation of nature is largely located here, beyond wage-labour, in the broader struggle for less money- and market-driven forms of economy, politics, and culture”.

Far from opposing each other, Marxist and EJ/degrowth analyses are in fact complementary in many ways: while Marxian theory provides an unsurpassed analysis of the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, the degrowth critique offers fresh foundations for new forms of eco-socialism or eco-anarchism, and the EJ movements can provide a popular basis composed of *communities* of workers, artisans, peasants, indigenous people and members of the middle class. These communities are found to be active at the ‘commodity extraction frontiers’ as well as the ‘waste disposal frontiers’. We now turn to briefly reviewing some of these actors.

Alexander Chayanov (1995 [1924]) showed that subsistence-oriented peasants generally increase their labour supply only until the requirements of the farm are met, and that they therefore do not seek growth per se. In this sense, the family farm displays an economic logic that is very different from the profit-maximising capitalist firm obliged to honour its contractual arrangements and compete in the market (Gerber and Steppacher, 2017). This idea can be linked to Eric Wolf’s (1969) observation that smallholder peasants are especially vulnerable to land expropriations and other socio-ecological changes introduced by the world market economy, and that they are therefore particularly inclined to mobilise for restoring ecological-economic stability. Wolf further asserts that subsistence-oriented peasants have an independent economic base – even if undermined – that landless peasants or wage labourers lack. Smallholder peasants thus have both the reasons and the resources to resist and are de facto often key actors within EJ movements (Gerber, 2011). Seen in this way, subsistence-oriented peasants and indigenous people may be the allies of both the EJ and post-growth movements.

Chayanov’s no-growth logic may apply not only to smallholder peasants but also to artisans and petty producers. These groups, taken together, form an important part of the population of ‘developing countries’, where about 50 to 75 percent of the non-agricultural labour force is found in the informal sector. The latter characteristically follows a logic of simple reproduction while accumulation with technical change is uncommon, and the generally low returns are rapidly consumed in most cases (Gerber and Steppacher, 2017). Without idealizing their situation, one can note that many artisans and petty producers follow a no-growth approach that centres on household needs, and this is also the case with many worker cooperatives.

Finally, various strands of the feminist movement are also potential allies of EJ and degrowth. A long tradition of feminist activism and scholarship has emphasized the centrality of social reproduction and reproductive labour, often performed with a gendered division of work. Yet, such labour and the wealth it creates go un- or undervalued and unrecognized, most notably in conventional tools of economic measurement and representation (such as the GDP). Ecofeminist thinking – although

covering different and at times clashing lines of thought –, in particular, builds on the premise that the suppression, invisibility, and the undervaluation of nature's work and women's labour are parallel – and needs to be tackled together.

The simultaneous deployment of materialist and spiritual values is also observed in ecofeminism, where 'materialist' is not understood in a narrow sense but refers to the fulfilment of physical needs, biological embodiedness and ecological embeddedness (Salleh, 1997; Mellor, 1997). In that sense, ecofeminism goes beyond conventional Marxian analyses and stresses the reproductive work of a variety of actors (e.g. unpaid domestic labourers, peasants, indigenous peoples), which enable the existence of our living systems (Salleh, 1997), and emphasizes the contradiction between reproduction and capitalist growth (Picchio, 2014; Dengler and Seebacher, this issue).

And it is the sphere of reproductive work that often puts women on the forefront of EJ movements. Gender is a fundamental factor that mediates human relationship with nature, as it often implies differential roles, responsibilities, positions and values across women and men. Women typically shoulder a disproportionate share of the reproductive labour that engages with environmental conditions and contribute much less to environmentally destructive activities (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Consequently, they are often harder hit (in economic, social and cultural terms) by environmental degradation and pollution, have access to fewer opportunities to deal with such adverse impacts, and undertake a disproportionate share of mitigative labour vis-à-vis worsening environmental conditions. The field of social reproduction in general, and care work in particular, have gained heightened attention also within degrowth, as emphasis is put on the reproductive economy of care (D'Alisa et al., 2014), understood not only as caring between humans, but also between humans and the non-human environment. A similar emphasis on care and broader reproductive activities is found within other central debates of the degrowth proposal, such as those on conviviality, work-sharing, and commons.

To recap, women, peasants, artisans, workers and indigenous people may recognize that post-growth and EJ, together, match some of their core interests and/or values. Beyond classic labour struggles, these various groups are typically engaged in struggles against the negative impacts of capitalist growth on their living conditions.

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper starts from the observation that both degrowth and EJ movements share a common quest for profound socio-ecological transformations towards justice and sustainability, and that an alliance among these research and activist communities is essential. Accordingly, we have discussed five ways of linking degrowth and EJ and contextualised the different aspects their link(s) explored by the papers of this special issue. Of course, this relationship is still tenuous, and its future consolidation cannot be taken for granted. Yet we see it as an 'organic' one, since degrowth and EJ contest the same fundamental processes –in short, the nature and impacts of our economies' relentless expansion— in a complementary and synergetic way. *Without a degrowth strategy, EJ movements will never fully succeed and vice versa.*

It was, after all, André Gorz, an activist-scholar deeply concerned with environmental injustices, who coined the term degrowth (Demaria et al., 2013). Modern degrowth was thus directly born out of concerns for environmental (in)justices. However, if EJ and degrowth will actually converge in the future depends, to a large extent, on a number of practical barriers related to differences in languages, ontologies, geographies and class background of the different activists (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., this special issue).

A successful example of such a convergence took place in Germany via *Ende Gelände* ('Here and no further'), a large civil disobedience movement seeking to limit global warming through the phasing-out of fossil fuels. Every year since 2015, up to 4,000 activists have carried out direct actions to stop open-pit coal mines and coal-fired power stations. In parallel, remarkably, an annual degrowth summer school has been organized, explicitly linking 'degrowth in action' and climate justice. The summer schools are prepared by *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*, an NGO of young scholars and activists that focus on the alliance between the two movements.

This example shows that the work of concrete articulation has already started and that similar convergences are likely to gain importance as twenty-first century unfolds with a high risk of further multi-dimensional crises. Of course, other social movements will have to be included – such as those for the commons, spiritual ecology, post-development and eco-feminism – and more research and action will be needed to strengthen their combined impacts. It was the objective of this special issue to focus on the potential one strategic alliance, the one between EJ and degrowth, and to place it resolutely at the centre of ecological economics.

### **Brief overview of the contributions**

Each paper of this special issue engages with at least one of the theses we have presented above, and all offer multiple and complementary insights on the relationships between degrowth and EJ. Three of the papers featured in the issue are theoretical, dealing with the concepts of climate justice and the commons, work and just sustainabilities. Two of them offer a feminist perspective as a potential way to explore the links between degrowth and EJ. The remaining eight are empirical and cover a wide range of issues (like water, waste, agriculture and fossil fuels) and geographies (North America, Mexico, China, Eastern and Western Europe), with particular attention to North/South relations. The last paper, together with three commentaries, offers a critical perspective of a potential alliance between degrowth and EJ movements.

The first paper by Ellie Perkins sets out a framework for assessing climate resilience from an equity standpoint, in terms of commons enhancement (thesis III). Perkins argues that in moving away from growth fetishism, climate justice advances in parallel with the (re)establishment of sustainably-governed commons. In the second paper, Emanuele Leonardi demonstrates the relevance of working-class transformations for analytically understanding and politically enacting the connection between Degrowth and EJ (theses IV and V). He argues for liberation from both polluting work (e.g. ecological reconversion of certain industries) and wage labour (e.g. universal basic income). The third paper by Corinna Dengler and Lisa Marie Seebacher draws upon feminist and decolonial studies and explores



to what extent degrowth in the Global North can promote global intragenerational justice without reproducing colonial continuities (theses III and IV). In order to avoid this, the authors argue that degrowth activists have to seek alliances with social movements from around the world on equal footing.

Cle-Anne Gabriel and Carol Bond, for their part, discuss how seven 'just sustainabilities' principles rooted in EJ and concerned with natural resources distribution can contribute to the degrowth agenda (thesis III). In a fifth paper, Karl Frost explores how the growth agenda and mentality have driven the destruction of indigenous resource-bases and economy (theses I, IV and V). He shows how the direct action resistance campaigns of First Nations communities in British Columbia (Canada) are placing traditional practices and ways of life in opposition to extractivism, simultaneously rebuilding community and physically stopping unwanted extraction. Mario Fuente-Carrasco and his colleagues focus on grassroots water struggles in Mexico and examine two dimensions: their political dynamics that seek a transformation from below based on local institutions; and a theoretical-methodological approach based on social metabolism, generating a regional interpretation of the concept of degrowth (theses II, III and IV). In the seventh paper, Mladen Domazet and Branko Ančić test to what extent Croatian EJ activists are supportive of degrowth, as compared with different aspects held by the general population and various socio-demographics strata. The aim is to propose points of practical and intellectual convergences (theses I, II and IV).

Irina Velicu, for her part, looks at two anti-mining movements in Eastern Europe to explain how degrowth EJ is a process whereby people are making justice for themselves, equally enacting their imaginative capacities and political freedoms to reproduce the socio-ecological conditions for life by protecting their own traditional means of production, knowledge, values and identities (theses III and IV). Gabriel Weber *et al.* connect EJ and the struggle of citizens and environmental organizations to find a just waste management system in Mallorca, which delinks from the present growth-based waste management oriented toward large-scale incineration (theses II and III). The paper by Rowan Alcock examines a grassroots Chinese movement called the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (NRRM). He shows how the NRRM is a prominent example of EJ movements in China and how it resonates with a number of degrowth sources (theses I and IV). Mario Pérez and his colleagues analyse an inventory of almost 300 conflicts in Andean countries (Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia), showing how they are linked to extractivism and contested by indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant communities. These socio-environmental movements are sometimes successful in stopping extractive projects and are congruent with alternatives to growth-based development, such as *buen vivir* or *sumak kawsay* (theses I and II). Finally, Beatriz Rodríguez-Labajos *et al.* undertake a systematic exposition of the main concerns and possible analogies between the scope of action of Environmental Justice Organizations (EJOs) in the Global South and the postulates of the degrowth movements in the Global North (thesis IV). The authors conclude with an overall caution about a straightforward alliance.

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