Chapter 8
Degrowth and the Barcelona School

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8.1 Introduction

Degrowth refers to a radical political and economic reorganization leading to drastically smaller, and much more equitably shared, resource and energy use (Kallis et al., 2018). This chapter, following a personal narrative and recollection (Sect. 8.2), explains how the Barcelona school has shaped theoretically recent degrowth thinking (Sect. 8.3) and then how this new thinking, merged as it is with European/Francophone and Anglo political ecology, renews and transforms the field of ecological economics within which the Barcelona school emerged (Sect. 8.4).

8.2 History of Degrowth and the Barcelona School

I arrived in Barcelona from Berkeley in January 2008. I had encountered the vibrant group of researchers activists coalescing around Joan Martinez Alier in conferences, and I was impressed by the mix of scholarship and dedication to social justice the ICTA team transmitted – and to top it all, located in legendary Barcelona, the city where another world had been, and could still be, possible. In April, everyone I knew from ICTA was heading to a conference in Paris on 'degrowth', which somehow had skipped my attention. I felt like missing a party that no one had invited me to join. I played it cool – well I was working with water and coevolution, what was it for me in a 'degrowth' conference? But I couldn't hold my cool for much longer when people came back from Paris with the contagious excitement of something new being born.

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In my own research on water resource development and urbanization as coevolutionary processes, I had reached the conclusion that the elephant in the room of unsustainable water management was capitalist growth. Powerful growth coalitions between real estate developers, banks, politicians and engineers were organized to make sure water does not limit urban growth, and unless this reality was confronted (politically, but also analytically), all talk about water conservation or demand management was just nice talk. Degrowth was the word I was missing – liberating me, at last, to utter what I stood for and what I saw necessary. Uttering it alongside Joan and our community at ICTA, I could let go of the fear of sounding politically incorrect and committing academic suicide.

The summer after the degrowth conference, Lehman brothers collapsed (no relation) and the greatest economic crisis of our generation unfolded. I remember Joan delivering his first lecture of the Fall semester on 'socially sustainable economic degrowth'. He started by saying that this was the last big crisis he would live to see (wrong – not only he would live much longer, but also crises turned out to be the new normal). He hoped that the global justice movement would grasp the opportunity and turn an undesirable recession into a 'socially sustainable' degrowth. Some would misconstrue his argument as a celebration of the crisis because Gross domestic product (GDP) and emissions fell (a straw man argument that those of us defending degrowth keep encountering in the current pandemic crisis). In the essay that accompanied the lecture, Joan explained clearly to those reading in good faith his thesis: Economic fundamentals were changing, growth encountering its limits. The question then was: Would there be a social force that could make the necessary adaptation sustainable rather than disastrous? What sort of struggles and policies would make this possible (Martinez-Alier, 2009a)?

The Paris conference brought together three streams of thought that together would form 'degrowth': the French school of décroissance/post-development emerging from the radical Continental political ecology of the 1970s with an emphasis on autonomy and conviviality; Tim Jackson and Peter Victor's steady state economics of managing without growth; and the Barcelona school's political ecology that pointed to growth's dependence on unequal exchange and exploitative extraction at the world's 'commodity frontiers'. A historian first and foremost, Joan wrote the first history of degrowth, tracing this early mixing of Anglo ecological economics with Franco political ecology to the translation of an edited volume of Georgescu-Roegen's essays to French in 1979 (entitled 'Demain la décroissance'), unearthing along the way a forgotten advocacy of zero growth in 1972 by EU's president Sicco Mansholt (Martinez-Alier et al., 2010a).

Organizing the second international conference of degrowth in Barcelona in 2010, we formed a group of 20–30 young – and not so young – researchers and activists, which with newcomers and departures has been together ever since (as 'Research & Degrowth'). I am not boasting if I say that our group singlehandedly put degrowth in the academic map, with an avalanche of scientific publications in English. We helped set up the biennial international conferences, out of which a community, research agenda and political discourse emerged (Demaria et al., 2013;

D'Alisa et al., 2014). Today, in a context of climate breakdown and economic crisis, degrowth is prominently covered – positively and negatively – in the pages of the Guardian, the New York Times or the Spectator, attacked by the likes of Stephen Moore, aid and ideological guru of Donald Trump. We kept the discussion around degrowth alive in a period of recession when one would expect it to subside like the 'limits to growth' debate did in the 1970s – and we worked to make it common sense to the extent that a young activist like Greta Thunberg would talk about 'fairy tales of growth' at the podium of the UN.

8.3 Core Concepts of the Barcelona School Informing Degrowth

Behind the claims of degrowth lie core concepts of Joan Martinez-Alier that we have worked with in Barcelona. Let me focus here on three, among many: the energy costs of producing energy; cost-shifting and how it sustains a growing global social metabolism, while causing ecological distribution conflicts; the weak commensurability of different languages of valuation (Martinez-Alier, 2009b).

The insight that to produce energy you have to spend energy, and that hence different energy sources have different 'EROIs' (Energy Returns of Energy Investment) is not Joan Martinez-Alier's of course. Howard Odum and early ecological economists emphasised this aspect of energy production and Stuart Hall among others developed EROI metrics. Martinez-Alier's contribution though was in centering ecological economics as a study of the energetics of economic life. In his history of proto-ecological economists – natural scientists writing in nineteenth and early twentieth century treatises in economics – he showed how the economy can be understood as a process of capturing and distributing useful energy. Economics should be concerned with understanding and calculating these flows and transformations of energy, and not epiphenomenal 'laws' that govern monetary quantities with no necessary connection to physical reality (Martinez-Alier, 1990).

I assume that it was through his research of peasant economies in Andalusia and Peru that Joan appreciated cultural ecology and the arguments of anthropologists about the energy efficiency of peasant societies, and how pre-capitalist production systems yielded more energy out of the energy they invested to capture solar flows. This attention to the energy and resource efficiencies of small-scale and decentralized, sufficiency-oriented production is central in degrowth scholarship, where small is not only beautiful but often better. This connects to the appreciation that the growth machine has been fuelled by high EROI fossil fuels, an input that allowed the expansion of wasteful in terms of resource and energy production systems. This attention to energy returns makes many in the degrowth community sceptical of the possibilities of 'green growth'. Degrowthers postulate that a transition away from fossil fuels, and towards renewable energy sources may slow down the economy (Kallis et al., 2018). Some could go even further and argue that a society powered

by solar and wind would need to reorient its economic life around the intermittency of these resources, evolving into a kind of 'new peasant', de-urbanized civilization (Smaje, 2020). This resonates with Georgescu-Roegen's prediction/advocacy of a bioeconomy of solar-powered neo-peasant societies for the future.

Economic production, Martinez-Alier has always argued, is a metabolic process that is entropic. Metabolic means that like our bodies, the economy needs a constant input of energy and resources, which it converts into useful goods and waste. This conversion is entropic, because an amount of energy and materials is always irreversibly lost along the way (Kallis, 2018). Martinez-Alier emphasised how the metabolic requirements of a growth economy meant that a constant influx of materials is extracted from the world's 'commodity frontiers', peripheral territories where untapped resources are found or waste discarded 'out of sight'. Following the work of William Kapp, he conceptualized extraction and waste disposal at these frontiers as a case of 'cost-shifting', core areas and privileged groups profiting at the expense of peripheral areas and disadvantaged people, often exploited along hierarchies of race, ethnicity, gender or class (Martinez-Alier, 2009b). Growth in this reading is not just a matter of technological progress, human capital or a culture of innovation but of unequal exchange, cheapening and exploiting poor people and their natures and securing a low-cost inflow of materials and fossil fuels (Kallis, 2018).

This growth of the global metabolism, Martinez-Alier (2009a) argues, is a source of 'ecological distribution conflicts', conflicts over the distribution of environmental costs and benefits, communities at the commodity frontiers organizing to stop their exploitation. These mobilizations that attempt to put a stop to the engine of growth at its input side, Martinez-Alier claimed, are a force of degrowth (even if not intentionally) – if successful, they will push for a reorientation of the core economies. In that, he sees a natural alliance between the global environmental justice movement that fights against cost-shifting and those who want to see degrowth in Europe (Martinez-Alier, 2009a). Granted, those fighting against specific extractive projects in the periphery might not be against growth as such, and may still welcome some form of economic development in their territory. Here there is a link with the post-development school of thought that highlights the alternative modes of well-being and social organizing emerging from capitalism's peripheries, often in conditions of conflict against extractive, growth-driven projects (Kothari et al., 2019).

Martinez-Alier and out teacn Barcelona studied ethnographically concrete conflicts in commodity frontiers and revealed how the parties involved use different 'languages of valuation' based on different cultural systems of assigning value (Martinez-Alier et al., 2010b). On the one hand, there is the economic language of the market: cost, profit and GDP. On the other, there are valuing systems based on community, sacredness and spirituality that may ascribe intrinsic value to non-human natures or particular ways of being. Different value systems are 'incommensurable', that is there is no common metric – monetary or else – upon which to compare them; but in a true democracy, they could be 'weakly comparable', that is the relative pros and cons of different options for different people according to different value systems deliberated and negotiated. From an analytical perspective, this

shifts attention to the power relations through which the economic language of market metrics and exchange values comes to dominate other value systems, and the ways communities can organize and resist market colonization.

This framework speaks directly to original concerns of degrowth scholars, anthropologists like Serge Latouche or Arturo Escobar, who saw a clash between local economic cultures and homogenizing forces of a globalized economy commodifying uncommodified spaces and relations, drawing violently peripheral regions into the circuits of capitalist growth. Escobar (1996) talked of ontological cultural conflicts. And Latouche (2009) developed his theory of degrowth inspired precisely by places he encountered in his fieldwork in South East Asia and Africa, where alternative economic cultures were being crushed by the growth machine. For Latouche, the 'de' of degrowth decolonizes a cultural imaginary in the West saturated by the idea of constant expansion and a singular way of market organization. Degrowth can then be understood as the prioritization of different values and languages of valuation over those of market economies, not least GDP – a 'revaluation' that is part and parcel of slowing down global social metabolism.

8.4 Shaping Ecological Economics

In the previous section, I saw how our ideas in the Barcelona school, inspired by Joan's thought, shaped thinking and research on degrowth. Here I want to show how our thinking on degrowth in turn challenged certain aspects of ecological economics, the interdisciplinary community within which our school was based. In other words, what I argue is that our contribution to degrowth was not simply to bring ecological economics in – rather we have developed a new approach that has changed (or at least aspires to change) both degrowth and ecological economics research.

The origin of ecological economics can intellectually be traced back to the Limits to Growth report, growth in the scale of an economy seen as limited by the external ecosystem that provides material and resources. Ecological economists have distinguished between efficiency and scale – markets may allocate resources efficiently, but still grow the scale of the economy to a level unsustainable by the supporting ecosystems. The particular breed of ecological economics we have developed in Barcelona through our engagement with political economy and ecology and the Francophone school of degrowth points, however, to a very different and more radical type of ecological economics and of understanding society–nature relations.

First, in our work, there is a shift of emphasis from external planetary boundaries to collective processes of self-limitation. The point as I have argued (Kallis, 2019) is not so much whether there are limits to growth and where exactly are they, but instead how to organize effectively to limit growth. Limits in this vein, are part and parcel of what Francophone political ecologists have been calling 'autonomy' – the capacity of collectives to determine their own laws and limits, freed from mythical

imperatives of gods, markets or experts. In my book on limits, I take the lead from Martinez-Alier's history of the anarcho-feminists of Emma Goldman who defended birth control not in the name of overpopulation but because they wanted to stop the capitalist and imperial war machines while freeing women to enjoy sex. I argue that degrowth, first and foremost, is such a project of self-limitation – a culture of limits in the pursuit of joy and well-being, not just a defensive strategy of averting disaster and sustaining the current system longer, as one can perhaps interpret the Club of Rome's work.

Second, there is increasing awareness in our writing of the ways under which capitalism structures both the geography and tempo of global social metabolisms. True, non-capitalist industrial systems also pursued growth and had extractive and expansive metabolisms. But accumulation is a capitalist invention, and today capitalism is the only game in town. If we want to understand which resources are extracted, where and when, we need to engage analytically, and politically, with the profit logic of capitalism. Many of the ecological distribution conflicts at the world's frontiers are not only conflicts against the impacts of extraction or disposal but also conflicts against the enclosures that capitalism continues to engender. Cost-shifting in other words is a more general form of appearance of what Marxist scholars have called accumulation by dispossession, the separation of people from their means of production and livelihood, a process that started with the original enclosures, but is constantly repeated in different historical moments as the capitalist growth machine needs to bring new territories and relations into the commodity and accumulation circuit. Degrowth in this sense is part and parcel of decommodification and the social struggles to defend and reclaim the commons.

The limits to growth debate, and to an extent ecological economics were silent on the question of capitalism, but also focussed too much, in my view at least, on the prophetic, 'warning of doom' side, and less so on the affirmation of alternatives, and the politics that can bring them about. And this is our third difference – in our work in Barcelona, we are very much interested in the alternative economic cultures of 'commoning' (of making and defending commons) that different communities, both within core cities or peripheral frontiers, juxtapose to capitalism. We are interested in alternatives – from cooperatives and community currencies to the agroecology of the Via Campesina movement – because of the embryonic forms of an alternative (post-growth, post-capitalism) economy they represent, but also because we seek to understand how these alternatives can organize politically and evolve into a bigger force that can bring systemic change (Kallis et al., 2020).

Our work in Barcelona does not just lament the power of an ever-encroaching capitalist growth machine but seeks to elevate and celebrate social opposition against the logics of capitalism – the myriad local movements of opposition to extractivism and growth (Scheidel et al., 2020). It is the intertwining of environmental justice movements with agrarian justice movements, indigenous claims, gender struggles, and even sometimes actual or potential working-class movements that can forge a transition towards economies that do put limits to growth. This transition

is being helped by the successful episodes in which oil is left in the soil, coal in the hole and copper or bauxite extraction is stopped by grassroots movements. One main task of us as researchers in the transition is to be active in such movements of environmental justice (e.g. Ende Gelände in Germany and thousands of other movements in all countries, very often repressed by force) and to learn and support the vocabularies and repertoires of action that they develop against the logic of capitalist growth.

And this is the main legacy of Joan Martinez-Alier and the school of thought he helped build in Barcelona: an activism-oriented research that seeks environmental and social justice and which puts first and foremost the ideas and the alternatives that emerge from the grassroots.

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