

International Conference
De-growth or Reinventing Life: Prospects and Projects

M.S. Merian – R. Tagore International Centre of Advanced Studies
'Metamorphoses of the Political' (ICAS:MP)
Modul 4 Normative Conflicts and Transformations

Conveners: Antje Linkenbach (MWK Erfurt, Germany), Vidhu Verma (JNU Delhi, India),
Co-organizer: Sunil Ray (Jaipur, India),

Venue: Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Mohali
(Punjab)

Tentative date: March [between 22 and 27], 2021

Concept Note and Call for Papers

I Rationale

Modern industrial (capitalist) society and its impacts on institutions, lifeworlds and subjectivities have been critically discussed in the social, political and economic sciences. Under scrutiny came the aspects of bureaucratisation, rationalization and the supremacy of instrumental reason, but also the underlying models of a utility maximising individual who is driven by desires, greed and consumption (see the work of Max Weber, Frankfurt School of critical theory, Karl Polanyi). In the 1970s the Western countries saw the emergence of a debate questioning 'growth' as seemingly benign mechanism of global economic and social progress. This debate foregrounded natural resources, and the problem of dominance of nature came into even sharper focus.

The most popular and influential intervention at that time was the so-called Meadows Report on 'The Limits to Growth' (1972), which for the first time addressed the devastating ecological impacts of growth and ultimately led to the (doubtful) concept and practices of sustainable development. A few years after the Meadows Report Herman Daly voiced his concern about the depletion and overuse of natural resources in 'steady-state economics' (1977), suggesting a zero-growth economic system as sustainable solution. This view was considered unsatisfactory by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, who in his pioneering work of 1971, 'The Entropy Law and the Economic Process', had already propagated the necessity of not only a decline, but a reversal of

growth. This book was later translated into French under the title 'Décroissance: Entropie, Ecologie et Economie' (1979) by Jacques Grinevald and Ivo Rus, who sensed a congruence with upcoming debates in France. The French debate was later spearheaded by Serge Latouche (since the 1990s), and with the term 'décroissance' being (re-)translated into English as 'de-growth', not only the intellectual discourse started to expand on a global scale, but a whole movement consolidated at the turn of the millennium.

Twenty years later the intellectual and political presence of the issue of 'de-growth' is still remarkable. Since 2008 activists (-cum scholars) call for bi-annual international conferences on de-growth, basically with the aim to develop proposals for immediate political action. Across countries many individual scholars as well as joint research projects focus on the topic, while partly using more inclusive catch-words like 'post-development', or 'post-growth', allowing for a broader range of critical possibilities (Latouche 2009; Schmelzer und Passadakis 2011; Muraca 2011; 2012; D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis, 2015; AK Postwachstum 2016). Debates also go beyond the immediate economic perspective and open up to concepts like happiness and good life, well-being, justice and democracy. Within economics and mainstream development theory these concepts had been considered as promise and by-product of growth-oriented ways of life, however this promise has failed and they have become a backbone of the current de-growth approach (Rosa and Henning 2017, Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012, Bohmann and Muraca 2016).¹

The debate on de-growth has meanwhile transcended the Northern countries and includes perspectives from the global South, where in many countries people (re-)activated own ideas and concepts (like economy of permanence, indigenous forms of good life, cosmologies linking humans and nature) that challenge the Western capitalist imaginary of growth and development (for India see Kumarappan 1946, Shrivastava and Kothari 2012, Nigam 2011, Gerber and Raina 2018; for South America Gudynas 2011, Martinez-Alier 2012, Acosta 2018).

¹ One should not forget that alternative routes to development or alternative development were discussed earlier and in other scholarly contexts, but they were very limited in their focus on transformative practice (see for example Amartya Sen's capability approach, 2001; Denis Goulet's development ethics, 2006; postcolonial ideas of alternative development voiced by Indian scholars like Dilip Sheth 1989, and Rajni Kothari 1989).

Recently Gerber and Raina (2018) have made an attempt to establish discussions on de-growth in India. While focusing primarily on economic alternatives to the 'global model promoting Western-type growth-driven societies' (p. 8), they are aware that alternative economics, or alternatives to mainstream economics, cannot be discussed without the wider social and political context. They deliberately call their critical project 'post-growth', as alternatives include a spectrum from reformist to radical approaches. The authors distinguish six forms of post-growth (p. 9ff): post-GDP approach, abolishing GDP as useful indicator for economic policies and establishing better indicators (1); a-growth or selective de-growth, claiming that some sectors need to shrink while others can grow (2); steady-state economics, promoting 'non-growing societies based on a stable material and energy through-put' (3); post-extractivism, societal change away from dependence on resource extraction and moving towards production based on renewable energies (4); post-development or concepts of 'good life', 'living -well', calling for reorganizing economies and communities under the guidelines of solidarity, radical democracy, ecological *swaraj* (5); de-growth, seeking 'radical alternatives of downscaling, redistribution and stabilisation of production and consumption'; the approach includes changes in value systems, and the search for new forms of sociality and politics (6).

The two last mentioned approaches – good life and de-growth – emphasize 'life' and ask how human beings can reimagine and restructure their ways of living based on a comprehensive process of rethinking fundamental assumptions of what does it mean to be human. While such transformative 'options' have to come up with ideas of new forms of economy (see e.g. Niko Paech 2012 on change in consumer behaviour, Poitier 2015 and Johanisova & Vinkelhoferova 2019 on social solidarity economy), they must also envision new relationships between the social, the individual and nature, so far separated in modern discourse and practice. Thus, it seems essential that debates on good life and de-growth link up with critiques of modernity.

Critical western theorists of modernity (Arnason 1993, 1997, Castoriadis 1991, 2005, Wagner 1994, 2008) have drawn attention to the dual structure and the inherent tension of the modern constellation: modernity grounds, on the one hand, in the vision of an unlimited expansion of rational mastery, on the other hand in the promise of autonomy as questioning and self-transcending capacity, which allows for alternative ideas of collective self-determination and self-limitation. As a unique form of civilization

Western modernity is also characterized by its dynamics of expansion and the imposition of Western hegemony on others, causing the global diffusion of both - the new cognitive model, linked to modern science, rationality and progress as well as the possibilities for autonomy, critique and emancipation. The rationale behind the expansionist impulse and the demand for radical transformation of pre-modern societies is the promise of progress and well-being for all, implying linearity, teleology and salvation (for a critique of development see e.g. Frank 1975, Escobar 1995, Rist 1992, Sachs 1992, 1999, Pieterse 2001, Linkenbach 2009).

The French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis has put the core idea of Western modernity in a nutshell: it is 'the idea that the unlimited growth of production and of the productive forces is *in fact* the central objective of human existence'. He calls this idea a 'social imaginary signification' (1991: 184). According to the logic of development all societies on the globe must subscribe to this imaginary, otherwise they will remain in the undesirable state of 'underdevelopment', a derogative term which subsumes the pluriversity of societies under one umbrella, ignoring their socio-cultural particularities and their character as equal option of social existence.

Critical voices demand a radically new imaginary that re-defines the objective of human existence by fundamentally re-considering human relationships towards nature, fellow-beings and the own self. Such a new imaginary can serve as backbone for the transformation of modern Western (capitalist) life-worlds, as well as for the self-determined, future-oriented (re-)organization of the life-worlds of those which have long been subjected to modern hegemony. A new imaginary may thus allow for plurality - for a polycentric world, or 'a world in which many worlds fit' (Mignolo 2011, Ramirez 2008).

While some Western scholarship as well as political and environmental activism has embarked on the emancipatory project of de-growth and good life and produced strong critical voices and practices that are widely visible, audible and listened to (see above), the majority of those individuals and communities whose epistemologies, knowledge systems, practices and outlooks may already contain alternatives to growth and development, are rarely audible, because they have since long been suppressed, marginalized or ignored by labelling them backward, underdeveloped, primitive, local, traditional etc. It is high time to enter into a sustained dialogue with them. What is needed is to carve out a space of encounter and learning, where Western emancipatory

thoughts and projects can meet post- and de-colonial views and strategies, which consequently delink from the dominant Western imaginary and (re-)present other options of thinking, knowing and being. All ideas and projects will derive from local, regional or national environments, but activating the communicative potential of translation, they can be shared, mutually understood and so enter into a larger global dialogical project (see Santos 2006).

II The Conference

Only very recently scholarly initiatives have made first attempts to link up with other experiences and 'share the various ideas and visions of alternatives that are being discussed and practiced across the world' (Kothari 2018: 278; see Schulz 2016, Kothari et al 2019). The M.S. Merian-R. Tagore International Center of Advanced Studies 'Metamorphoses of the Political' (ICAS:MP) provides a most suitable platform to support and advance such global exchange. Furthermore, its cooperation with other Merian Centres established in Guadalajara (Mexico), Sao Paulo (Brasil) and Accra (Ghana) is conducive for instituting a dialogue between countries of the global South.

The conveners want to seize this unique opportunity and organise an International Conference in India in March 2021. Holding this Conference seems also timely, because of two recent developments. Firstly, the geological notion of *anthropocene* has emerged as a vital socio-philosophical concept. Not only questions about the degree of human impact on climate change, pollution, destruction and remodelling of nature etc. are widely and controversially debated, but also the processes and strategies developed in reaction to global environmental and socio-political challenges seem deeply contested. Secondly, the Coronavirus pandemic, which we all encounter at present, has forced governments to enact several urgent measures in order to keep the spread of the disease under control. These measures have led to changes in individual consumption patterns, have affected social interactions as well as production processes and market dynamics. The pandemic has at least for the moment transformed private and public life as well as the economic landscape. While most of the changes and accommodations will be temporary, the crisis has triggered processes of reflecting structures and behavioural patterns under conditions of neoliberal capitalist globalisation. Involuntary processes of de-growth might lead to greater awareness of the need for more sustained ways of living.

The Conference will be about *futures* – ‘preferred futures’ (Alam 1999), alternative futures, the ‘futures we want’ (Schulz 2016) – but even more it will be about *power and politics of transformation*. The aim of the conference is not simply presenting utopias, but down-to earth and realistic possibilities and solutions in the process of building new worlds. Therefore, while the modern imaginary has to be questioned and alternative visions have to be formulated, we are very much interested in learning about localized ways alternative vision are put into practice in form of movements, projects and experiments in contexts of unequal power distribution. We are in particular interested in *vernacular* concepts in which alternatives are expressed, communicated and shared.

The organizers encourage **conceptual papers from a diverse regional background**, which may focus either on theoretical arguments or on empirical studies. Papers can be submitted along the following broad **thematic lines**:

- **Guiding concepts and imaginaries** (good life, *buenvivir*, *Kwamekasay*, life projects, resonant world relations...)
- **Human–nature relationships** (critique of dichotomies, alternative cosmologies /ontologies, instrumental vs. non-instrumental forms of interaction and communication, mastery vs. custody and care, vernacular concepts like *kawsaksacha*– living rainforest, *panchamama*– Mother Earth ...)
- **Alternative economics** (critique of concepts of classical political economy, labour and self-realization [*Selbstbetätigung*], economy of permanence, ecological economy, gift, reciprocity, solidarity, consumerism vs. basic needs, self-limitation of human needs, negotiating scarcity and radical abundance ...)
- **Democracy / governance** (parity of participation, radical democracy, deepening of democracy, ‘ruling by obeying’, Gandhi’s ideas on local autonomy...)
- **Sociality, social relationships** (relationality, in/dividuality, conviviality, in/equality, recognition, vernacular concepts like *kyosei*–living together, *Ubuntu*–humanness / interconnectedness, *agaciro* – dignity, self-respect ...)
- **Knowledge** (knowledge and wisdom, de/valuation of ‘indigenous’ knowledge, appropriation of indigenous knowledge ...)
- **Self and Identity** (being and becoming, autonomy, in/dividualisation, cosmovision and the position of the self, language and power ...)

III Organizational Issues

Contributors are asked to indicate their interest of participation and send their title electronically to the organizers until September 1st, 2020; the deadline for the abstract is November 1st, 2020. The full paper has to be submitted by February 1st, 2021.

The organizing institution will pay for travel expenses and will provide adequate accommodation.

Please direct all **technical** inquiries to

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