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Equitable, Ecological Degrowth: Feminist Contributions

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Abstract

This paper uses feminist ecological economics and ecofeminist methodologies and theory to contribute to Degrowth in theory and practice. These feminist contributions involve highlighting unpaid work and ecological services, redistribution, and participatory processes as crucially important in developing the new paradigm and movement for equitable material Degrowth.

Keywords

Feminist ecological economics, ecofeminism, unpaid work, economic redistribution, political participation, diversity.

1 Introduction

In attempting to bring about sustainability with justice, the Degrowth movement and the ecofeminist and feminist ecological economics movements share a great deal. In this paper I will first outline the basic ideas of feminist ecological economics, and then discuss its potential contributions for Degrowth theory and activism.

One way to view feminist ecological economics is that it is mainly about the interface between paid and unpaid inputs into the measured economy. Undervalued factors include women's work (and indeed all under- and unpaid work), as well as non-monetized services and material inputs from "nature" which, as they become economically significant, are incorporated into the economic sphere virtually for free. Whenever they are estimated -- e.g. Robert Costanza (1997), Hilikka Pietilä (1997), Giacomo d'Alisa (2009) -- these unpaid or "free" services and goods generally dwarf the measured economy in value, yet they are usually not central to policy deliberations and they are often ignored entirely. Women's work and "nature" are crucial and irreplaceable foundations of the economy -- this is the basic statement of feminist ecological economics. Maria Mies has shown how capitalism was founded and continues to depend for its existence on the unpaid and underpaid work of women; Mary Mellor and Ariel Salleh and many other theorists have traced the material links between women's work and what economists call "ecosystem services"; these issues of underpayment and inequality based in social injustice and environmental degradation, and the predictable ways in which they create economic winners and losers, are grounded in colonialism, patriarchy, under-development, and race and class discrimination both within countries and globally.

There are historical, power-based reasons for these injustices, and they are not easy to uproot. Degrowth and feminist ecological economics, among other movements, share the need to think strategically and from a practical, political-economy perspective in addressing these challenges.

An ecofeminist or feminist ecological economics methodology begins close to home, for both theory and activism; looks closely at the boundary between the paid and the unpaid, and at the relation between social and material value and political power; and finds strength, resilience and sustainability in diversity. This kind of approach, I believe, will benefit the Degrowth movement.

The following sections of this paper discuss in more detail several Degrowth-related issues: in particular, those regarding unpaid work and ecological services, redistribution mechanisms, and participatory political processes. In the concluding section of the paper, I offer a few specific proposals for how Degrowth can effectively build on these contributions from ecofeminism and feminist ecological economics.

2 Unpaid work and services

To illustrate some of what I mean, and how it's "hidden in plain sight" in our everyday lives, here is a photo I took in the park near my home in Toronto. The parents playing with their kids in this picture are unpaid; the childcare work they are doing is not included in GNP. The nannies -- can you tell who they are? -- do receive money for their work, so it is included in GNP. But this is not a dichotomy: they are ALL underpaid, along a sort of sliding scale, especially when we consider the crucial importance of raising, educating and socializing the next generation of people, who will face challenges unprecedented in human history. In Canada, struggles around the dearth of public supports for childcare are ongoing. Where would the economy be without this important work? Would Degrowth put the nannies out of a job? In what sense might it be better for all parents to care for their own children -- and how can this find economic expression without harming the most vulnerable?

To the extent that Degrowth is just about -- or includes -- pushing the frontier between the paid and the unpaid further towards "unpaid," it fails to address these concerns about relative values, undervaluation, and justice -- and in fact Degrowth might even exacerbate the exploitation of underpaid workers, and of nature. This is because, as economies become more local and more service-oriented in order to generate less material throughput, there will be shifts in how much work is done and who does it, how much trade takes place and who is put out of work as a result, and whose economic needs are met and unmet. Sometimes, when people face sudden or extreme economic stresses, they turn to "nature" to meet their

economic needs, even to the point of environmental destruction. The only way to trace the effects of a particular Degrowth-inspired policy measure or change proposal through the whole economic system is to be very specific about what the proposals are, include people from the full range of socio-economic positions in the discussion, and pay particular attention to the implications for the natural environment.

Another picture from my neighbourhood also illustrates this. My local vegetable store is featuring clementines from Spain, at a very cheap price. Canadians could instead get their vitamin C from peppers grown locally in greenhouses – but what would then happen to the clementine farmers? If we compare the footprint of clementines shipped to Toronto from Spain, and peppers grown locally, which would come out better? And in a Degrowth sense, for whom is it better to eat cheaper clementines or more expensive local peppers?

This highlights the importance of being able to speak in very precise terms when we are discussing Degrowth. What sounds good in theory and at a high level of generality may, or may not, make sense in practice from political, social, environmental, and equity points of view. The interesting and tricky part is in the details! In order to explore this, we have to bring together people with diverse knowledge and viewpoints to share and learn from each other about the concrete implications of Degrowth.

I have one more example from close to my home. A Degrowth-friendly, alternative way to distribute local food is through volunteer-run food box programs emphasizing local, group-purchased produce, like the Good Food Box program in Toronto. This program, run by a local food-security-oriented NGO, is government-subsidized and also has additional NGO and private foundation funding, partly because it provides jobs and healthy food for low-income people in the city. But if this kind of food distribution system were to become more large-scale, would it put greengrocers out of work – most of whom are recent immigrants? And who would do the volunteer work to keep the system going: the same women who are now the mainstays of such pilot projects, and who garden and preserve food, and do most of the household recycling tasks? Is this kind of Degrowth desirable or in any sense sustainable? What social changes need to take place to pave the way for equitable, ecological Degrowth?

3 Redistribution mechanisms

Another important ecofeminist insight related to pies and Degrowth has to do with its potential effects on global redistribution. Under the right political circumstances, growth provides the mechanism for redistributing incomes and resources from the better-off to the somewhat worse-off, without too much conflict. The reason that growth has a central role in reducing material inequality is that without growth, someone must give up resources if others are to gain them. Since people usually desire peaceful, democratic governance, it seems better to allocate slightly larger portions of a growing pie to previously-disadvantaged groups so that overall, inequality is reduced over time. But pies – especially ever-larger pies -- contain crusts and fruit, and take energy to bake. If we are calling for no growth and in fact for Degrowth, what mechanism are we proposing which will address historically-based material inequities, both within and among countries and regions, as well as globally? Without growth as the engine, what drives progressive redistribution?

This is why I believe it is fundamentally and crucially important for Degrowth theoreticians and activists to seek out assistance from those who already – and generally by default rather than choice -- have a great deal of experience with unpaid and low-paid work, with recycling and reusing materials, with living very simply, doing without cars, eating no meat, letting others eat first, using animal or human traction rather than fossil fuels to accomplish their daily work, fabricating shelter and the other necessities of life from non-industrial materials. These people are all around in this diverse world we inhabit; they are not just in other countries, or in the global South. But are they here at this conference? Why is this? The disenfranchised must be invited to share their views on Degrowth and how to build more equitable societies while living lightly on the earth. They are the experts! And if they do not see the relevance of Degrowth for themselves, if Degrowth does not speak to their condition, if they do not come to Degrowth conferences, meetings and demonstrations even if good food, childcare and transportation subsidies are provided, then Degrowth activists must seek to modify the program so it is relevant for everyone -- especially those who know how to, but don't especially like, living without. Unless everyone who is potentially affected is included in the Degrowth movement, we won't be doing it justice.

4. Participation, politics, and dynamic change

One of the pitfalls of a superficial approach to gender and equity in theoretical work is what feminist scholars have come to call the “add women and stir” syndrome, which occurs when well-meaning analysts frame a problem and then ask, “What are the effects of this on women?” or “How can we get a feminist perspective on this issue?”

Here is how Elizabeth K. Minnich describes the problem with this approach. Her example relates to academia, but it applies to political and activist movements as well:

“In a now famous line, Charlotte Bunch characterized the problem. ‘You can’t,’ she said, ‘just add women and stir.’ It was an apt observation, crystallizing what many had learned in their own efforts to find ‘lost’ women and add them to their courses. The women could in fact be found, but, once ‘found’, they often didn’t fit – they couldn’t simply be dropped into standing courses. Why not? In looking for individual women who had done what men had done, we had not after all shifted anything very radically.... The problem was that although the ‘found’ women seemed to prove... that women are by no means and in no ways inferior to men – we had not actually learned much about women....If some women were mathematicians, why were not more mathematicians women? ... What were women who led the lives prescribed for women – differently across cultural, group, and class lines, but always differentially from males – doing...? ... We needed to undo the blinding definitional conflation of some few men with humankind, the ongoing delegitimizing of the significance of the category woman in real lives... What is important... is the task of thinking through how scholarship and politics have always been related; why the new scholarship on women could not (and should not) become only a sub-specialty within the standing disciplines; why finding things that women had done that were as similar as possible to men’s achievements did not tell us enough about the lives of women; and why, then, it would not suffice – was not even possible – simply to add women of ‘a feminist perspective’ to scholarship that was premised on our devaluation and exclusion.” (Minnich 2005:74-75).

And here is Sandra Harding’s suggestion for how to resolve this problem (for “S&T”, science and technology, substitute “Degrowth” or any other discipline or issue):

In theory, the solution to this problem is obvious: S&T changes must be designed from the perspective of women’s lives — not “women” as an abstract category, but the particular groups of local women who will otherwise bear the bad consequences of such changes. Ironically, such “standpoint” approaches, as they are called, use existing inequalities of social location (gendered social structures and meanings) as resources for gaining the most accurate accounts of both women’s and men’s lives (long list of additional references in the original). In social relations organized by power inequalities, no “view from nowhere” is possible, as everyone has interests in the outcomes of knowledge and policy projects. Such standpoint approaches show how to use social inequality as a resource for knowledge about “how the world is” and, thus, how to overcome the perpetuation of inequality — here in the form of the failure of development projects.... The kind of strong objectivity identified here demands that knowledge producers be more accountable for nature and social relations; to their critics inside and external to scientific communities; to those likely to be disadvantaged or marginalized by the dominant conceptual frameworks whether they are in a position to bring their disadvantage to the attention of distant policymakers or not; and to S&T practitioners’ strong commitment to avoid “might makes right” in the domain of knowledge production. It also demands that policymakers be accountable in their goal of moving toward sustainable human development, even when it leads them to challenge “might makes right” (see Harding 1992). (Harding 1995: conclusion).

Very similar considerations also apply to race, ethnicity, and class. Degrowth needs to include people from a diversity of gender, race, class, and geographic perspectives FROM THE START in order to build a strong, resilient, and politically-dynamic framework for eco-socio-political change.

5 Conclusion

I have some proposals for how we can do this.

- 1) Build and gather information to develop effective alternative indicators of well-being, including social and economic equity and work-time data, to demonstrate the importance of unpaid work and services for the economy and provide a mechanism for giving credit to those responsible.
- 2) Foster equitable governance institutions including citizen democracy, class and gender balance in political representation, public and community-based environmental and political education, anti-discrimination training for all, and the dismantling of the institutional frameworks which ensure the continuance of power elites.
- 3) Resist theorizing about Degrowth from the perspective of the wealthy, male, North until the question of viable redistribution mechanisms has been addressed.
- 4) Look around the room: Who is missing? Why aren't they here? How can we go to them to learn whether, or under what conditions, they see Degrowth as a good idea? (If we are really willing to do this, it may involve a substantial reframe of the questions we are considering.)
- 5) Try not to assume that our own, or any particular, experiences and priorities apply to all people. In fact, diversity strengthens our work both theoretically and politically.
- 6) Focus from the start on understanding the practical implications and specific policy measures which we believe will bring about Degrowth, so that everyone can imagine their effects in their own lives and how the necessary socio-economic transitions will affect different groups of people, in relation to their relative position in the global economy. This will allow us to consider Degrowth's effects on unpaid work, distribution, and political power in very concrete terms, and will also help to show how the incentive systems built into the economy play out in the material world.

My main point about Degrowth is programmatic as well as definitional – because I know that Degrowth activists and theorists have seriously considered these sorts of questions. They are recognized throughout the Paris conference's Degrowth declaration (Degrowth 2008). What we are striving towards should be explicitly called “equitable ecological Degrowth,” acknowledging the central importance of equity and redistribution. And we should seek allies, educate, organize, and build coalitions that are as broad as possible in this project, recognizing its importance for all of humanity and for the Earth.

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