

Degrowth and Ecofeminism: Perspectives for Economic Analysis and Political Engagement

Degrowth has become a dazzling term within critiques of capitalism. The concept challenges the assumption that economic growth makes people better off and happy: The production of goods and services is supposed to improve living conditions, and the ongoing growth of production and consumption is assumed to raise living standards and well being. The ecological crisis tells us that this story of social progress through economic growth is highly questionable.

Degrowth is one possible answer to the problems created not only by the overexploitation of natural resources. Moreover, degrowth questions the way of life linked to growth by asking: What makes life and people really prosperous? Or, as Kallis et al. (2012) put it: “DG [degrowth] advocates have a different vision of prosperity, one based on dramatically less material abundance and consumption” (Kallis et al., 2012: 174). So, the problematic aspects of the growth economy do not only stem from its negative impacts on the environment. The analysis must go deeper into the full range of ecological and social aspects of wellbeing and the quality of life.

Ecofeminist economics can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the growth economy on the one hand and to develop fresh perspectives on alternatives to capitalist growth on the other hand. That is the aim of this paper. I wish to take up the suggestion made by Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier (2012) in their introduction to *Ecological Economics* 84 on *The economics of degrowth*: “There is a clear synergy that remains to be explored between ecofeminist economics (with its emphasis on the value of non-market work, and on real human needs) and the economics of degrowth” (Kallis et al., 2012: 179). I will show how ecofeminist analysis can help to assess alternatives to the industrial mode of production and consumption and to enrich theoretical insights and policy-making.

Ecology and, in a broader sense, the human-nature relationship have always been crucial for feminists: Historically, in the midst of European Enlightenment, women were excluded from rationality and subjectivity by the claim that women were closer to nature, given their capacity to create new life—just as nature does. Economically, the assumption that many of women’s capacities are innate by nature, not acquired by training and acculturation, may lead to a view of women and their care work as being closer to nature. Politically, women and gender issues have been marginalized through the division of the public sphere of power and the private sphere of love, i.e. two separate realms conceived as imbued with different norms and values. The binary of nature/femininity and culture/masculinity embodies hierarchical relations: The hierarchy of culture and nature—nature being the “undomesticated ground” (Alaimo, 2000) from which ‘rational man’ has to emancipate—is foundational for the gendered hierarchy of knowledge, politics, and economics.

Ecofeminism as a feminist political movement and as a theoretical stance focusses on the women-nature-nexus. It is a way of thinking and practice which integrates ecological, economic and feminist concerns: “Ecofeminist political economy sees a connection between the exploitation of women’s labor and the abuse of planetary resources. Women and the environment are both marginalized in their positions within the formal economy. As economists have long recognized in theory, but often not in practice, the economic system often views the environment as a ‘free’, exploitable resource while it ignores or undervalues much of women’s lives and work. Thus, the material starting point of ecofeminist analysis is the materiality of much of what the world defines as ‘women’s work’ (although it is not necessarily all done by women or by all women), a theme that is also found in much of the work of feminist economists” (Mellor, 2005: 123).

Integrating ecofeminist political economy into current economic critique bears a huge potential for scientific analysis and for political decision making, as this paper will show. In order to develop my argument I will first describe how the ecofeminist economics approach

links the ecological crisis to the crisis of social reproduction and then sketch some basic findings of feminist economics in a broader sense in order to develop the theoretical framework for my analysis. By “ecofeminist economics”, I refer to a body of literature which sees a parallel between the exploitation of women’s work and the exploitation of natural resources: Both are necessary prerequisites for capitalism but they remain widely costless because they are taken for granted. When using the term “feminist economics” I mean a wider range of feminist economic analysis comprising various strands of thinking that share the concern of social reproduction as an important economic issue neglected by mainstream liberal economics. The second part of the paper is dedicated to the presentation and discussion of three alternative approaches considering themselves as solutions to the current economic and ecological crisis. They are the most relevant approaches in the global North when it comes to alternatives to the capitalist growth economy. I have chosen these approaches for their common concern about the scarcity and depletion of natural resources and their relevance for thinking economics differently—with respect to environmental and societal issues. A further characteristic feature the three approaches have in common is the complete absence of gender awareness.

Therefore, the three approaches will be analyzed in the third part by discussing each of them against the theoretical background of ecofeminist political economy. The basic premise of my argument is that feminist analysis can improve each approach and that this will also advance gender equity. Thus, the fourth section combines the approaches with different strands of feminist economics. I wish to underline that feminist economic analysis does not necessarily lead to the same conclusions, neither in conceptual nor in political terms: An equality framework is not the same thing as an ecofeminist framework. In the conclusion, I will sum up the analysis in order to show why it is necessary to integrate ecofeminist perspectives into the degrowth debate.

1. Understanding capitalist crises from a feminist perspective

Ecofeminist political economy analyzes the degree to which the ecological crisis is linked to the gender order and thus exacerbates the crisis of social reproduction. Various authors describe the crisis of social reproduction as the underprovision of care for people who depend on it, as care is very time-intensive and is not accessible for the rationalization demands of the capitalist production mode—and, due to the very nature of care work, should not be accessible for these demands (cf. Folbre, 2001; Jochimsen, 2003; Molinier et al., 2009; Razavi and Staab, 2010). The crisis concerns the excessive demands on and the overburdening of those who carry responsibility for social reproduction, the vast majority of which, given the gendered division of labor, are women. Not only do women carry the responsibility for those in need of care—the follow-up costs that ensue from the ecological crisis are also dumped on their shoulders.

Feminist economics in a broader sense shares the concern about social reproduction and links it to the organization of labor markets, production and consumption patterns and the unequal distribution of income and well-being. Social reproduction is the common feature of women's work in a very global sense. Time use surveys show that all over the world women perform the major share of care work, i.e. child rearing, taking care of the sick and the elderly, education, health care and social provisioning (cf. Budlender, 2010; Folbre, 1995). This work is carried out as unpaid labor in the private sphere of households and as wage labor in the public sphere within a gendered labor market (cf. Folbre and Nelson, 2000). Non-market care work in households and families is invisible for the market economy as no monetary transactions are involved. Public care work as part of wage labor is often poorly remunerated as it is being considered as part of the natural and innate capacities of women (cf. Waring, 1988; Bakker, 1994; Beneria, 2003). The persistent gender pay gap of 25 percent on average

which separates men's from women's income in industrialized countries assures that women stay available for social reproduction.

2. The concepts Green New Deal, Degrowth, and Solidarity Economy

In the following, I will briefly introduce these three approaches that claim to offer alternatives to the current crisis of capitalist production and consumption modes. In my analysis I rely on heterogeneous points of departure and on quite variously developed bodies of literature. The literature addresses people in the global North and their responsibility to change the economy—it is noteworthy that this is a shift away from blaming the global South for its increasing resource consumption. The objective of my analysis is to see to what extent these approaches theoretically reflect gender issues and whether they offer connections to ecofeminist perspectives.

The *Green New Deal* aims for an economic reorganization that combines ecological necessities and social demands. In order to achieve this transformation, three pillars are regarded as necessary: the restructuring of financial markets, investments into climate protection by developing renewable energy and sustainable transportation (Giegold and Mack, 2012: 41). Financial markets must be regulated in order to curb speculation and to prompt banks to return to their core task¹—financing “sustainable economic development” (ibid.). The restructuring of the energy and transport sectors as well as investments into climate protection are at the heart of the reorganization of production. The labor and employment strategy of the Green New Deal primarily targets these sectors: reorienting traditional, carbon-based production toward the complete supply with renewable energy will create numerous new, high-quality jobs in environmentally sustainable sunrise industries. Cutting back harmful industrial subsidies and introducing sustainable tax reforms will make investments into the

¹ By “core task”, Giegold and Mack understand the financing of economic investments in contrast to financial speculation (ibid.).

educational and health sectors possible in order to achieve greater social and economic justice between rich and poor and to cushion price increases in primary raw materials for low-income households: “Socially vulnerable groups must not be the losers in the ecological transformation” (ibid.: 42).

From the perspective of a *post-growth society*, the regulation of financial markets and a tax reform are also essential, but priority is given to other fields of state policy. These are, most importantly, old-age security (Höpflinger, 2010), the health sector (Studer, 2010), and education (Ax, 2010). In all three areas, this approach aims at a fundamental restructuring of the security systems toward more self-activity and responsibility for oneself and others. As expenditure-intensive sectors, these areas have in the past largely been dependent on economic growth and tax revenue or income-related insurance contributions. Dissociating these sectors from economic growth will necessitate new forms of organization and financing. Jackson (2009) for example advocates for an ecological tax reform, for reduced working hours—he means wage work—and for revitalizing the notion of public goods (Jackson 2009: 171-185). At the same time, the care sector is regarded as holding great potential for meaningful activities and employment opportunities. The central regulating screw for an economy that respects the limits set by ecological realities is consumption, the “core of the growth motor” (Røpke, 2010). This is also a focus of the French *décroissance* movement: consumption as a motor for growth on the one hand determines which goods are produced, and on the other hand drives demands for higher wages, which in turn induces greater demand for goods—a vicious circle. More conscious consumption, however, is considered to lead to higher quality of life on the individual as well as social level (cf. Coyle, 2011; Soper et al., 2009).

For *solidarity economy*, meeting the concrete needs of human beings is the core task an economic system should accomplish: “It is about value, not profit” (Voß, 2010: 16). The projects and initiatives that pursue solidarity in their economic activities are not dissociated

from markets. However, they are not interested in the accumulation of capital by maximizing profits, but rather in the utility of the activity or product for the involved parties. Labor is not treated as a commodity traded on the labor market, which is subsumed and exploited by capital, but rather as “living human work (...). People do not work for the profit of others, but for themselves” (ibid.: 18). Accordingly, the production and distribution of goods and services is organized locally and on a small scale. Rootedness in local settings is also a principle of global networking—local projects are regarded as having better chances to satisfy the needs of people in various places and in diverse cultural and social settings than the global market or so called development aid. Besides the demand for the full development of the labor capacities of individuals, proponents of solidarity economy also demand the democratic and emancipatory reorganization of the economy (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2006). This includes questions regarding the decision power and the power of disposal over property, and attaches vital importance to debates surrounding commons, including their use and management beyond the state and private property regulations (cf. Bollier and Helfrich, 2012).

Before addressing their blind spots and nodes of intersection with feminist economic critique, I would like to point out that the three models outlined above are not as clearly delineated from one another as I have pointedly sketched them. Certainly there are overlaps. What I try to demonstrate here are the basic orientations of the three currents. The Green New Deal largely represents the green economy, which makes economic success contingent on the ecological restructuring of the industrial production mode. Social injustice is to be cushioned by more just taxation and financial policies. Post-growth, degrowth and *décroissance* more fundamentally raise the question concerning the relationship between material prosperity and individual and social wellbeing. This concept aims at developing forms of social and economic organization that reinterpret prosperity and quality of life, freeing these aspects from the dictate of economic growth. The projects and initiatives that feel indebted to the principles of solidarity economy are committed to implementing the demand for self-

determination, cooperation, and the satisfaction of needs in the here and now. Among the three approaches, solidarity economy is the farthest removed from capitalist forms of production, and closest to the realization of concrete utopias.

3. Feminist economic perspectives on these alternative concepts

In my analysis and assessment of the three concepts described above, I draw on central premises of ecofeminist political economy as well as feminist ecological economics (cf. O'Hara, 1995; Perkins, 2007). As mentioned at the outset, I focus on the unpaid labor of women in the area of social reproduction, which is in principle regarded as an infinitely available natural resource and appropriated by society without recognition.

The following basic assumptions of feminist economic critique are at the heart of my analysis: First, responsibility for others and care work are central components of any economic system, but no money flows into these activities since they remain within the private realms of family and household. Therefore, the care economy is invisible to mainstream economics² (cf. Waring, 1988; Bakker, 1994; Beneria, 2003). Second, as long as social participation and power relations are tied to employment and income, gender justice is contingent on the equal participation of women and men in the labor market (cf. Bakker and Gill, 2003; Ferber and Nelson, 2003; Peterson, 2003). Third, employment and income opportunities are curtailed by care work, and hence unpaid care work must be equally distributed among men and women (cf. Warren, 2000b; Doucet, 2004). And fourth, a shift of social reproduction work into global care chains³ must be regarded critically since this

² An important attempt to make women's economic share visible are time use surveys (cf. Budlender, 2010).

³ The concept of global care chains has been introduced into feminist economics by Arlie Russel Hochschild (2000: 131). She defines global care chains as the "series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring" (ibid.). The notion is widely used to describe the persistent feminization of social reproduction: Although women in the global North have been largely integrated in the labour market the care work has not been shared between men and women but delegated to undocumented migrant women.

transforms neither the gendered division of labour nor the feminization of care work, and also reinforces class hierarchies among women (cf. Anderson, 2000; Lutz, 2008).

Based on these criteria, I will analyse the three approaches regarding their compatibility with as well as their blind spots for gender-related issues. First of all, none of the three approaches explicitly refers to the gender order. Neither do they identify the gender hierarchy as an economic structure that is foundational for the capitalist production mode, nor do they mention gender justice—including the need for revaluation of women’s care labour and increased awareness of the social and economic significance of responsibility and care work—as explicit aims in their reorganization of the growth economy. However, there are various indications that either implicitly or explicitly refer to gender relations.

4. Assessment of the three models from the perspective of feminist economic critique

In the following section, I will combine the implicit gender assumptions with feminist claims for gender equity. Again: the approaches to alternative economies examined in this paper assume that natural resources are not infinitely available and that great economic and social efforts are necessary to replace the growth paradigm—which is based on the exploitation and waste of natural resources—with a different economic system. The suggested solutions differ in their understanding of the crisis and in their programmatic aims.

The *Green New Deal* takes the present conditions of industrial capitalism as its point of departure. It does not question the basic functioning of capitalist production and reproduction. Moreover, the approach is not in principle critical of growth, it simply demands a different kind of growth: “A new growth policy for the eurozone can only be successful if it reduces the dependence on imports of fossil fuels and other non-renewable raw materials.”

(Giegold and Mack, 2012: 5).⁴ This does not mean, however, that the concept is not

⁴ It should be stated that the Green New Deal presents indeed an alternative economic paradigm to current neo-liberal capitalism. The approach stresses the need for the re-regulation of financial markets and for state

compatible with some feminist claims. A gender equality approach could demand that the implicit, not explicitly addressed gender premises of the Green New Deal be critically reassessed. Its utter unawareness of the care economy would probably pose the biggest challenge in such an endeavor. But since the approach is politically championed by Greens on various levels of national and European policy, demands for gender equality in the modernization of economic and social structures should find advocates.⁵ This also holds true for labor market policies. It should be expected that the participation of women in the labor market is evident (cf. ILO, 2010; OECD, 2012). Hence, the Green New Deal must set itself the objective to better integrate women into technical professions in the energy, transport, and construction sectors. The future will show if this allows for more environmentally sound technical solutions as well as social innovations.

The *post-growth society* fundamentally questions the given patterns of production and consumption. But it does not question the principles of the market economy. Tim Jackson responds to the question whether or not a post-growth society would be organized in capitalist terms with a reference to *Star Trek*: "Is this still capitalism? Does it really matter? For those for whom it does matter, perhaps we could just paraphrase Star Trek's Spock and agree that it's 'capitalism, Jim. But not as we know it.'" (Jackson, 2011: 202). Thus, the aim is a different kind of capitalism that dissociates economic growth from the exploitation of resources and frees social welfare from its dependence on growth. What does this imply in feminist terms? Social reproduction is a central aspect of the post-growth society, in the realms of paid as well as unpaid care work. Since the restructuring of the economy in this model primarily envisions a shift of economic activities to the sector of publicly financed, personal care services, this could imply a revaluation of traditionally female jobs. The

regulated policies in a Keynesian sense. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for this important indication. Nonetheless, the absence of social reproduction in the premises of the approach is unsettling.

⁵ "Gender equality is not just about economic empowerment. It is a moral imperative, it is about fairness and equity, and includes many political, social and cultural dimensions. Gender equality, however, is also a key factor in self-reported well-being and happiness across the world." (OECD, 2012: 2).

professionalization of healthcare and care for the elderly as well as better education and childcare—this could create high-quality and high-demand jobs for women (and men). But it requires an awareness of the gendered nature of these sectors. The same is the case for unpaid work in the so called private sphere, which is closely connected with consumption: who will be responsible for the extra household work created by the change in consumption behavior? In a post-growth society, as in all other societies, gender equity can only be achieved through the equal distribution of income and power. The basis for both is the fair share of paid work and unpaid care work for men and women. One feminist approach that advocates these demands very strongly is Caring Economy (*Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften*) (cf. Jochimsen, 2003, 2005; Netzwerk Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften, 2013). One could regard this approach as a stream of ecofeminist thinking (cf. Kesting, 2011) although the advocates of Caring Economy do not posit this term. The core notion of Caring Economy is “(re)productivity” (Biesecker and Hofmeister, 2010). Biesecker and Hofmeister define (re)productivity as an economic concept that encompasses productivity as a whole. This implies nature’s productivity as well as the “social (re)production of human life through the caring activities assigned to women” (Biesecker and Hofmeister, 2010: 1707). With their (re)productivity concept, they aim to overcome the distinction between and the hierarchization of production modes that are monetarily valued and production processes in nature and society that are not recognized in monetary terms, and to broaden the analytical scope to embrace the economy as a whole: “It is only a conception of labor broadened to encompass activities neglected until now by economic theory that would open our eyes to the fact that productivity is inseparable from ‘reproductivity,’ even when it comes to people’s day-to-day activities” (Biesecker and Hofmeister, 2010: *ibid.*). Wage work and paid and unpaid care work would thus have to be incorporated into the post-growth society’s vision as equal and equitable elements. This perspective is compatible with the degrowth claim for the reduction of working hours (cf.

Jackson, 2009, chapter 12). Unfortunately, degrowth proponents do not reflect on the gendered character of time (e.g. Folbre and Bittman, 2004).

Solidarity economy rejects most traditional economic patterns and postulates a “systemic change” (Akademie Solidarische Ökonomie, 2012). Solidarity economy is at the core of a postcapitalist politics (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Its critique of capitalist modes of production and reproduction is most clearly pronounced in comparison to the other two approaches, and it also addresses questions of property, for example that the “private property of capital can no longer be used to gain profits at the expense of others and to increase one’s personal wealth” (Winkelmann, 2012: 126). The subsistence approach which has been developed within ecofeminism is a feminist economic current that most strongly accommodates this discussion (cf. Mies and Shiva, 1993; Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999; Mellor, 1997; Bennholdt-Thomsen, Faraclas and von Werlhof, 2001). This approach, which combines a strong critique of capitalism with a pointed critique of patriarchy, offers various possibilities for a feminist reassessment of the economic exploitation and hegemonic appropriation of the re/productivity⁶ of nature as well as women and their work. Many contributions to a radical ecofeminist political ecology take a global stance to the unjust economic world order dictated by the growth economies in the global North (cf. Salleh, 2009a). Treating with irony the ‘development’ discourse, Ariel Salleh speaks of “capacity building for the global North” by ecofeminist scholarship and activism (Salleh, 2009b: 304). There is an ongoing debate among feminists about how to deconstruct the woman-nature-nexus which often underlies ecofeminist assumptions—but this is a topic for another paper (cf. Mallory 2010, Bauhardt 2013).

5. Conclusion

⁶ I prefer the spelling re/productivity to (re)productivity in order to stress the inherent connection between both sides of the economy.

I have shown the absence of gender awareness within the three currently most discussed alternative approaches to the capitalist growth economy. Although each of these approaches claims to suggest solutions to the crisis of capitalism none of them takes into account that individual and social well-being depends heavily on care work—before, during, and most probably after the present crisis. Ecofeminist political economy with its focus on the crisis of social reproduction shows how to develop a comprehensive understanding of the crisis: The crisis of capitalism should be analyzed as the finiteness of natural resources as well as the finiteness of women’s caring labor. In order to find viable solutions for the post-growth society, the gender order as part of the capitalist order ought to be fully understood. Economic change needs to respect both natural and social limits to growth. Perspectives for sustainable economic change are intrinsically linked to gender equity. Sustainable economic change would then imply a fundamental transformation of male biased economic concepts, of gendered modes of knowledge production, and thus of gendered power relations.

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