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A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE 4TH DEGROWTH CONFERENCE IN LEIPZIG

In September 2014, 3000 people gathered for the 4th “Degrowth” conference with 450 workshops, cultural events and plenaries in Leipzig, Germany. While the first three degrowth conferences had been primarily academic assemblies of a few hundred scholars and some activists, the 4-days-gathering in Leipzig got a distinct character because of the mixture of practical, conceptual and theoretical levels and approaches, and the huge participation of predominantly young people. The format was similar to that of social fora, however, with a much stronger emphasis on a collective, though diverse search for “another world is possible” linked to “good living” for everybody.

In Europe, the analysis of the multidimensional crises as a systemic crisis has reloaded discourses in civil society, social movements, and critical academic communities about a paradigm shift to overcome the hegemonic development model that is driven by the logic of GDP-growth, profit maximisation and the societal domination and commodification of nature. This topical “degrowth” discourse is actually the third wave of growth critique: the first one emerged around the famous Club of Rome’s publication “The Limits to Growth” in 1972 feeding into concepts of steady state and degrowth (Daly 1974, Georgescu-Roegen 1979/1995). In the 1990s, ecological economists, post-developmentalists and ecofeminists criticised unsustainable and neo-colonial patterns of overproduction and overconsumption. As an alternative model they drafted concepts of a sufficiency economy (Sachs 1992) and a subsistence perspective (Mies/Shiva 1993, Bennholdt-Thomsen/Mies 2000).

The present discourses on degrowth and post-growth concepts are responses to the interlocking crises and to topical growth-driven “green economy” concepts. As the economisation of untapped natural and social resources and further liberalisation of access to and trade in resources can’t solve the systemic crisis, ecologists highlight once again the limits to growth, e.g. peak oil, peak water and peak land, the loss of biodiversity and climate change.

Presently, degrowth is a concept and a grassroots social movement in Europe and an umbrella for a broad range of critique of capitalist growth strategies. “Sustainable degrowth may be defined as an equitable down-scaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being, and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term” (Schneider/Kallis/Martinez-Alier 2010: 512). While degrowth-concepts are shaped as a “driver for change”, they are neither an elaborated theory nor an action plan for the transformation of economy and ecology but rather a “political slogan with theoretical implications” which opens up spaces for theoretical and practical explorations (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010:1742, 1745, Muraca 2012;2013). Those link up a critique of heterodox economics, concerns about neo-extractivist and highly exploitative use of nature and a critique of the catch-up model of development (Kallis 2011).

A key message at the Leipzig-conference was that “many small people who in many small places do many small things can alter the face of the world”. Different from conventional leftist approaches the point of departure was everyday life more than economic and political structures, modes of living more than modes of production. This made for a more holistic and less economic framing of the multiple crisis. The stress on politicising everyday life and subjectivities added to the old feminist saying that “the private is political” the reverse perspective of “the political is private”. Different from other conferences, a stronger focus was laid on transformative knowledge than on analytical knowledge, on concrete practices and strategies of change of the western model of civilisation rather than on repeated analysis of root causes of economic, social and environmental problems and the crisis. A broad range of concepts and principles like economy of sharing, peer to peer, transition town, commons, urban agriculture, cooperative housing, care, reproductivity, queer, small is beautiful and sufficiency made for a heterogeneous framing of a multitude of practical initiatives and alternative ways of living.

The many small initiatives and alternative projects are kind of practical critique of the corporate-driven globalisation with its transnational value chains of production, trade and consumption. What they have in common is a reclaiming and regaining of sovereignty over the own life and social reproduction, over production and consumption e.g. food sovereignty. Distancing themselves from the crisis-prone markets and states they state: „Your recession is not our degrowth“

They reclaim local livelihoods and regional circles of cooperation instead of the reckless global competition, transnational value chains and further liberalisation of trade and investment. The public kitchen that was set up in the courtyard of the university became a metaphor for the self-organised, needs-oriented perspective and new manifestations of collectivity and solidarity with references made to Ivan Illich’s concept of “conviviality” which implies “individual freedom realised in personal interdependence“. In this context a new culture of social protest and new dynamic forms of politics emerged in the recent past with direct action, alternative everyday practices and different ways of living.

Feminist Perspective

The Leipzig-conference made a difference from the scholarly discourses on degrowth published in journals like “Ecological Economics” and their striking absence of feminist discourses and of references to feminist positions. Feminist approaches, in particular the care approach was prominently represented in Leipzig, and overall participation was pretty gender balanced.

Following the old feminist sayings “We don’t want a bigger piece of the poisoned cake” (Devaki Jain) and “we don’t want to be mainstreamed into a polluted stream” (Bella Abzug), feminists don’t believe in market, techno and efficiency fixes for the economic and ecological crisis. For them, the heading of degrowth or post-growth is an opportunity to connect three significant feminist discourses of the recent past: 1) the care perspective with its focus on producing and sustaining social reproduction and the living foundations in society and nature (Charkiewicz 2009; MacGregor 2010; Bidegain/Nayar 2013) 2) commons and commoning, as democratic strategy and form of property that countervails the overall trends towards economisation and privatisation of public goods (Federici 2010; 2011; 2013), 3) and a perspective of good living based

on a critique of neoliberal globalisation, and its patterns of overproduction, overconsumption and imperialistic life style which are facilitated by resource and care extractivism (Brand/Wissen 2012). Care, commons and good living with a culture of enough can be seen as strategic sites for transformation and cornerstones of another development paradigm.

Feminists highlighted at the Leipzig conference care, commons and a sufficiency-based and good living-oriented economy because those three reference points share a rationale of social reproduction, provisioning, protection, precaution, nursing, subsistence, cooperation and reciprocity that countervails the growth and efficiency dogma of capitalist markets and the preference given to accumulation of capital and material goods. The exploration of another more value-based and justice-oriented logic aims at withdrawing energies and capacities from and breaking up the hegemonic rationale of unfettered and destructive growth in economic structures, human-nature-relation and in people's mind sets.

However, core in feminist discourses and practices is not a degrowth- or post-growth-perspective as a political goal or an economic theory but rather a search for good living and secured livelihoods, asking: What kind of growth do we want? At what expense? Unwilling to wait for the "great transformation" and tired of green and leftist blue prints, feminists converge with the Leipzig-conference in following the TATA-principle: there are a thousand alternatives – contrary to Margaret Thatchers TINA-principle of "There is no alternative". A basic assumption is that there is neither a one-size-fits-all recipe nor the one and only lever that would make the rest happen automatically. The challenge is to identify and explore various and multipolar entry points, opportunity spaces and transition strategies to shape alternative practices and other development paths.

The advantage of feminists is to bring the perspective of care into the new social movements and link it to resistance against the economisation and financialisation of everything. E.g. the German network "care revolution" gathers hundreds of small initiatives which centre around social reproduction, provision and commoning at the margins or outside of the capitalist market economy: food coops and guerrilla gardening, bee keeping on the roof tops in cities and honey production, user cooperatives, exchange of clothes, tools and technology. Instead of hammer and sickle the symbols of power are the toilet brush and the cake roll, and the central slogan reads: "care revolution against capital and the permanent crisis of reproduction".

Claiming a "caring economy" (Eisler 2008) aims at redirecting the whole economy at well-being and social cohesion, human and social growth, a sustainable resource use and society-nature-relations without renewed domination and exploitation of the "other", the global South, "cheap" labour and nature. Claiming a "caring democracy" (Tronto 2012) implies processes of commoning which ensure access to, just distribution and non-discriminatory regulation of commons and public goods (Bollier/Helffrich 2012; Linebough 2008). Claiming a "caring state" does not mean to ask for a revival of the European welfare state that created prosperity through the neo-colonial exploitation of untapped human and natural resources in the Global South and by appropriation of women's unpaid care work within the male breadwinner model. However, a state is needed that breaks away from the neoliberal focus of maximising competitiveness, and of reduction and externalisation of social and environmental costs in order to attract investors. It must shift its focus on fair distribution through regulation and taxation of

real and financial markets, and on protection of nature, social reproduction and the public good from being subjected to economisation and privatisation. At the same time, a caring state has to facilitate enabling spaces for an economy of solidarity.

Which ways forward?

At the Leipzig conference, this tremendous variety of ideas was carried forward by a young political generation, grassroots- and sometimes protest-based, most of them students while the classical and the radical left like occupy/blockupy (in Germany) or the anti-racist movement were nearly absent. Representatives of conventional trade unions that are still focussed on job security and wages do hardly participate in degrowth debates. Prominent NGOs from the environmental or development sector act no more as think tanks or drivers.

Though there was a lot of talk about connecting and communing, the diverse initiatives and concepts stood side by side with respect for each other, however without much interaction, dialogue and without much controversial debates.

No doubt: The North has to pioneer the move for a farewell to the idea of permanent economic growth because of its historical debt with regard to the expansion of capitalist development, emissions of green house gas and exploitation of resources in the global South (Salleh 2009). The shrinking of growth structures in production, trading and consumption has to be accompanied by a shrinking of the “mental infrastructures” of growth, accumulation and the logic of material more which govern the mind sets of the global middle class (Welzer 2011).

However there were a number of critical voices at the Leipzig conference that challenged the notion of “degrowth” as heading, paradigm and new version of socio-economic great transformation. Degrowth is particularly rejected as model for the global South. Instead, a very prominent position still claims “inclusive growth” like the World Bank does (at the Leipzig-conference: Sunita Narain from the Centre for Science and Environment in India). Ashish Kothari (2014) from India is very much in favour of a paradigm shift, however towards radical ecological democracy rather than a degrowth strategy. Latin Americans focus on the critique of resource extractivism and neoliberalism, and some complain that the notion of degrowth is not necessarily anti-capitalistic. Though highly controversial, the “buen-vivir”/“pacha mamma”-concept is still the key reference point (Acosta 2009). In Africa the critique of unequal distribution, non-trickle-down of GDP-growth and the myth of “Africa rising” is growing, however, this does not make for a degrowth strategy.

What is the outcome of the conference? What will follow? For many participants, already the process of preparing for more than a year for the conference in their local initiatives was a tremendous learning and reflection process, which decolonised the concepts of economism and growth as individual and societal goal. However, it is difficult to assess whether the Leipzig-conference fostered linkages and alliances between the scattered initiatives and helps to overcome the fragmentation of critical social movements. Presently, it seems that the degrowth-paradigm still has more mobilisation potential and some transmission power.

The spirit of Leipzig was nurtured by activism and an self-empowerment by doing something. A degrowth or post-growth perspective needs immediate practical start-ups, direct action and new collectives: everybody has to realise and to live everyday transformation thereby countering Theodor Adorno's saying: "There is no right life in the wrong one". This sense of new beginning is located on a broad range between a new form of anti-capitalism and being uncritical about capitalism. For the protagonists of "sharing" it is irrelevant who shares; they believe that the dynamic of sharing itself will undermine capitalism in the long run. In this new civil society landscape, references to the state vary from anarchist positions to social reformism. Critical questions and economic debates e.g. about social security if the state gets less taxes and revenues, or how to get back the economy from its profit-driven head on its caring feet, remained open.

Definitely, Leipzig was a marker on the way towards transformations, in particular in everyday life, and for the common good in a very heterogeneous civil society topography: It substantiated the felt need for a change of paradigm. This, however, was done sometimes without taking into account the prevailing power regimes and structures. It was puzzling and revealing at the same time that the wars, violence and authoritarianism all around and the inherent power relations were not discussed.

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