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Post-growth perspectives in Economic Geography

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This special issue takes account of the rapidly growing number of contributions from Economic Geography and related disciplines dealing with post-growth perspectives either conceptually or empirically. Before further commenting on the range and scope of the topics addressed in this issue, we would like to both contextualize this scholarship in the wider field of post-growth debates and highlight some of the most relevant inputs from our sub-discipline so far.

Current debates

Debates around finite resources and the negative implications of continuous material growth are not new and date back to the 1960s at least – and Resource Geography or Environmental Economic Geography responded to that critical claim already over the last decades (see overviews in *Hanink 1995; Gibbs and Healey 1997; Hayter and Le Heron 2002; Bridge 2009; Braun et al. 2018*). However, these debates have gained new momentum in the aftermath of the so-called world financial crisis of 2007/2008. Cumulating with other ‘global crises’ (hunger, migration, climate), this has led to an uptake of growth-critical thinking in broader academic, political, and mediatic discourses – see for example the ‘Stiglitz/Sen/Fitoussi report’ to the French government (*Stiglitz et al. 2009*), the European Union’s ‘GDP and beyond’ communication (*European Commission 2009*), or *Tim Jackson’s* seminal report

to the UK’s Sustainable Development Commission (*Jackson 2009*). More recently, the implications of the corona pandemic have given an additional (although possibly overrated) push to critical reflections on growth-oriented production systems and lifestyles.

Scholarly debates around post-growth can also be seen as a response to or a distinction from the concept of the ‘green economy’ (*UNEP 2011*), the latter advocating the feasibility of an ecological modernization of the current economy essentially through technological advances. The core assumption of this concept is that through efficiency gains in production and consumption continuous economic growth could be decoupled from material and energy consumption. However, and despite all efficiency-oriented changes of the last decades, at best a *relative* decoupling can be observed in some national economies (*WU Wien 2018*). That is, GDP growth rates are higher than those of resource consumption, but both curves still increase and are far from achieving an *absolute* decoupling. On the contrary, some industrialized countries even show a trend towards a “re-coupling” (*Hickel and Kallis 2019: 471*) of economic growth and resource throughput. Hence, the post-growth concept deliberately goes beyond efficiency gains and technological fix solutions and seeks for possibilities to overcome growth fixation (*Bina 2013; Kenis and Lievens 2015*). The notions of post-growth or degrowth will be used here as interchangeable umbrella terms for different

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types of approaches aimed at developing more environmentally viable and socially just modes of production and consumption (for possible differentiations between the terms see e.g. *Schmelzer and Vetter 2019; Lange 2018; Parrique 2020*). We do not adhere to the normative and partly radical pledge of the activist degrowth *movement*, but to the general idea that *research* on degrowth or post-growth approaches may offer ways to understand and fundamentally readjust growth-based mechanisms and motivations driving the prevailing economic system.

It must be emphasized that the concept of post-growth does not intend to ban growth as such, as is frequently misunderstood (*Hickel 2019; Kallis 2011; Kallis 2018; Smith et al. 2021*). Rather, it critically reflects on what kinds of activities are necessary for assuring social wellbeing (common-good orientation vs. profit maximization), and where growth in these sectors should take place, for example in relation to global distributional (in)justice. It also addresses the systemic constituents underpinning the growth paradigm (e.g. tax and interest rate systems, financialization and commodification, planned obsolescence of consumer products), including the question of wealth monitoring and evaluation (e.g. the problematic role of GDP growth as a key indicator for development).

Amongst the various attempts to 'spatialize' post-growth conceptually and empirically, one finds compelling contributions from Planning disciplines, for example on housing and urban development (*Nelson and Schneider 2019; Rydin 2013*), from Architecture, for example on land-use and building sufficiency (*Hertweck 2020*), from Urban Geography, for example on city-regional development (*Savini 2021*), or from Social Geography on community building, citizen empowerment, and participation through collaborative economies (*Jarvis 2017*). Many contributions apply sectoral (e.g. agriculture, tourism, mobility, craftsmanship) and/or local perspectives (e.g. urban food production, regional sharing schemes) (*Lange et al. 2022*). Furthermore, a part of this literature resonates with decolonial perspectives on extractive industries, distributional injustice, and environmental externalities in the Global South, a foundational pillar of for example the French degrowth/décroissance school (*Latouche 2006*). This interest in North-South-relations is also reflected in the contributions submitted to a widely advertised special issue of the journal *Environment and Planning A* on the "Geographies of Degrowth" (see editorial by *Demaria et al. 2019*).

With regards to Economic Geography scholarship, the last decade has seen a growing interest in post-growth concepts and practices (overviews in *Krueger et al. 2017; Schmidt 2019; Schulz and Bailey 2014*). Besides the growing range of publications – including the above mentioned special issue of *Environment and Planning A* or a similar endeavor in *Local Environment* (see *Schulz and Krueger 2018*) – one could also mention a series of special sessions and panels at international conferences, for example, the Global Conferences on Economic Geography held in Oxford (2015) and Cologne (2018), the Annual Meetings of the American Association of Geographers (e.g. 2017 in Boston), or the biennial German Congress for Geography (DKG – Deutscher Kongress für Geographie) 2019 in Kiel. In the German speaking context, a working group of the Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association (ARL) gathered twelve scholars from Germany, Switzerland, and Luxembourg for a three-year collaboration (2016-2019) which, amongst others, resulted in a comprehensive anthology edited in German (*Lange et al. 2020*) and English (*Lange et al. 2022*).

While an increasing number of Economic Geography scholars explicitly refer to the notions of degrowth or post-growth, other strands of literature adhere to the concept of 'diverse economies' (*Gibson-Graham 2008; Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020*) or 'alternative economies' (*Zademach and Hillebrand 2013*). These three sets of literature share (a) an obvious common ground as to the empirical phenomena studied (although with varying scope), (b) the critique of the reductionist view on 'the' economy (e.g. as expressed in GDP monitoring or economic development policies), and (c) the fundamental concern regarding the capitalist principles leading to growth fixation and its socio-ecological impacts.

Against this backdrop, the articles compiled in this special issue aim to add complementary facets to this proliferating field of research.

The contributions of this special issue

The paper of *Mayer, Tschumi, Perren, Seidl, Winiger*, and *Wirth* studies local and regional initiatives for growth-independent territorial development. By empirically analyzing seven selected social innovations – understood as new forms of cooperation or initiatives that help to solve social problems – in the Bernese Oberland in Switzerland, they show that these can

be effective means to question and to limit economic growth orientation at the local or regional level. Entrepreneurs in this field see non-commercial benefits as fundamental goals of their business activities. Especially entrepreneurial practices that target aspects such as re-localization, de-commercialization, low capital intensity, and self-governance provide promising starting points for growth-independent territorial development. However, the authors also point out that in the case of Switzerland, social innovations are not yet addressed in regional policy. They can hardly get publicly funded and supported as they do not fit the underlying economic development model which is still strongly oriented towards export-base theory and traditional growth concepts.

Drawing on the diverse economies approach (*Gibson-Graham 2008*), *Weck* and *Ritzinger* take a closer look at experiments with alternative ways of living and working at the local level in Germany. They read these emerging practices as forms of agency that challenge and transform established political and social arrangements. The authors analyze three German cases of arising practices at the crossroads of civic engagement and local administrations, either with or without the involvement of private businesses: (1) co-operation projects between municipalities and community enterprises, in particular a co-operation between the Krefeld city administration and a community enterprise that led to the re-use of existing buildings and neighborhood regeneration; (2) participatory approaches to sustainable land use in rural municipalities with a specific focus on the village of Kirchanschöring in Bavaria; and (3) collaborative development for sustainable residential areas with particular reference to a large timber-construction apartment estate in Munich. Even though the three cases highlight very different economic, social, and geographical settings, they all demonstrate the decisive role that local authorities can play in the field of sustainable development when they competently apply existing planning and building provisions, process designs, and participative policy approaches.

Affolderbach and *Médard de Chardon* critically examine the sharing economies' contribution to more inclusive, socially equitable, and spatially just transitions. They studied a total of 94 sharing initiatives which have a digital as well as a tangible presence in the cross-border region of Luxembourg and Germany. About half of these sharing initiatives explicitly pursue social and/or environmental goals. A more

detailed analysis of sharing platforms in the mobility (e.g. bicycle sharing systems) and food sharing sectors (surplus food exchange, community gardens etc.) reveals that local sharing initiatives tend to use established models by adapting existing apps and schemes to their own local context or by an appropriation of already existing sharing concepts which are translated into localized models. The authors demonstrate that sharing practices do not automatically provide a socially desirable outcome and/or added environmental value. Sustainability benefits very much depend on how sharing is operationalized. Benefits will be generated through concrete models of operation rather than through the act of sharing itself.

In contrast to the other contributions in this special issue, which mostly analyze local and regional case studies, *Braun* and *Gröne* look at the international Fairtrade system, an approach that has been established for many decades and seeks to improve the living and environmental conditions of producers in the Global South. Although Fairtrade's brand building aims at differentiation through alternative values of cooperation, trust, and fairness, it also works within the constraints of simplified and abridged advertising messages. Thus, there is a constant danger of manifesting North-South stereotypes and reproducing multiple forms of 'distancing' and 'othering' in advertising campaigns or on product packaging. Using a mixed-methods approach with semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey of German consumers, the authors examine the impact of the imagery of Fairtrade's advertising on (potential) Northern buyers. The analyses indicate that the visual language of Fairtrade's marketing has to be sensitively aligned to increasingly critical customers, who are more and more skeptical of overly moralizing images and exaggerated contrasts between 'poor' producers in the South and 'rich' consumers in the North.

Finally, the contribution of *Lange* and *Bürkner* focuses on the transformative potentials created by so-called persistence avant-gardes and prevention innovators. With special reference to different positions on the structural change of Lusatia, East Germany, after the politically decided lignite mining phase-out, they point out that the post-growth debate so far has paid too little attention to the motivations, motives, and forms of expression of divergent positions and that the post-growth movement often acts too quickly with variable forms of exclusion and othering. Thus, the authors plead for a more fundamental conceptual

consideration of antithetical developments, paradoxes, competing avant-gardes, and ambiguities in the post-growth debate. Moreover, they point out the need to more thoroughly consider new geographical fragmentations and processes of social peripheralization as important objects of investigation in post-growth research.

The contributions in this special issue display the variety and vividness of the current academic discourse on post-growth and alternative economies in Economic Geography. As the articles impressively show, this debate has recently evolved and has become more and more differentiated. Initially, the focus was mostly on studies of local social innovations and alternative economic approaches that were perceived as positive per se, but these are now increasingly being complemented by more critical perspectives which also take a closer look at the contradictions, ambiguities, and pitfalls of alternative economic approaches. However, the basic idea of many empirical and conceptual studies on post-growth geographies has not changed: The precise analysis of emerging and existing initiatives of a different way of doing business with the aim of exploring their potential for sectoral and geographical upscaling. However, upscaling should not primarily be understood in the sense of becoming bigger (e.g. through increasing commercialization as can be seen in some parts of the sharing economy), but rather in the sense of becoming more visible and relevant through adoption, replication, and emulation. This touches upon another crucial debate within post-growth scholarship that might deserve a further special issue.

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