

We Need to Change: analysing potential for degrowth across Europe

The proposed presentation is part of a Special session addressing degrowth issues in post-socialist European countries. In order to empirically determine some characteristics of Europe's post-socialist semi-periphery, we analysed how populations of these countries balance the trade-off between environmental stability and economic growth, as well as how that trade-off compares to that of European capitalist 'core'. This presentation summarises more extensive analyses of attitudes, concerns and self-reported behaviour which will be published in an edited volume forthcoming in mid-2014: Domazet and Marinović-Jerolimov (eds.) *Sustainability Potential of the European Semi-periphery*, Zagreb: ISR and HBS.

We start from emphasising the uniqueness of our historical moment. Though virtually every civilisation in recorded history ended at some point, often materially caused by overexploitation of the environment, these were local and regional phenomena. In today's interconnected and highly technological global society, the threat of collapse of civilisation is global in extent, both in terms of causes and consequences. This is because the world is exposed to several structural weaknesses, the most damaging being the irreversible global environmental change of climate and ecosystems, a necessary consequence of the capitalist mode of production and reliance on fossil fuels (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2013; Goldin 2013). This is a development model whose primary source lies in the ability to increase the global output of goods and services by at least 5% per year, despite clear signs of destructive outcome of continuing along such path. Whilst a reversal of that trend might bring relief for the environment, it brings about a collapse of contemporary growth economies, and subsequent collapse of societies dependent on them (Graeber 2011; Kallis 2011).

This special moment calls for a double perspective which projects physical trends with as high confidence as possible into the near future, and is at the same time sensitive to change in political, social and cultural spheres through which the projected material changes are made meaningful (Skrimshire 2011). Not least because it is in those spheres that we encounter signs of a 'peculiar historical juncture' that calls for our immediate attention in addressing increasing inequality in societies around the world. Leaving aside debates of whether prosperous degrowth is feasible and for how long, a realistic change has to tap into the existing potentials and understanding of limits within a democratic *populus*, whilst the very maintenance of such a political arrangement is one step in prevention of outright collapse. In this presentation we survey attitudes of 18 European nations regarding the trade-off between acceptance of environmental limits and the imperative of economic growth as the primary national objective.

We present the data for 18 countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Great Britain) from ISSP module Environment, which was fielded during 2009, 2010 and 2011, together with existing measures constructed in order to enable longitudinal and cross-sectional comparison (HDI, III, GINI, EF etc.). In analysing the ISSP Environment module we focused on extracting information that sheds light on environmental motivations for degrowth in terms of values, attitudes and commitments that prevail among European citizens. This selection of countries covers a wide range of European nations geographically and economically and lets us make tentative conclusions about differences in attitudes among the old and new democracies of Europe.

Without cheering or historical inevitability, we aim to prize apart the characteristics that could be used as possible metrics differentiating the potential of European populations regarding their readiness for prosperous degrowth. Differences in governance architecture, global outreach and historical development practices between core, semi- and peripheral European societies can be illuminating for opening questions regarding the institutions and discourses that invoke the growth imperative. This is reflected in the population's attitudes reported in our survey, which in turn can contribute experience, resources and practices to a coordinated effort.

We present statistical relationships between measures of income (national: GDP and individual inequality-adjusted income index-III), UN measures of human development attainment (HDI and IHDI) and environmental impact (Ecological Footprint-EF) across the range of 18 European states as background against which to interpret their respective populations' attitudes. As we show, European societies exhibit important differences in income, development attainment, internal inequalities and ecological footprint.

Regarding the use of ISSP survey data, for the purpose of the proposed Special session we briefly present the findings from extensive research that applies multivariate analyses to pair off composite and single-variable indicators against measures of state's wealth, inequality levels and social paradigms. In this analysis we use several newly-constructed composite indicators: (1) *Attitudes of Concern and Activation* and (2) *Attitudes of Material Sacrifice*, which measure individual environmental concern, willingness to take appropriate action and commitment to material sacrifice; (3) *Environmental Risks Perception*, and (4) *Pro-Environmental Behaviour*; (5) *Environment-economy trade-off*, which captures prioritisation of environmental stability over drivers of consumption; (6) *Non-growth indicator a* and *b*, which measure attitudes to the general impact of the growth imperative on the environment within respective countries, and finally (7) *Trust* indicator, which measures the prevalence of social trust within populations.

Our analyses suggest that personal concern, activation and willingness to commit to materially sacrificial practices are strongly correlated with average incomes of the corresponding countries' populations. This is supportive of the so-called 'prosperity thesis' (Franzen and Meyer 2010), suggesting that wealthier societies more readily commit to respect for environmental limits. This in turn suggests that environmental-protection motivation for degrowth cannot arise in the poorer European societies, which are focused instead on reaching higher levels of income. However, when we examine general environment economy trade-offs in development practices, trends in attitudes across European populations start diverging from the trend their respective income sets. The trade-off between environmental stability and economic benefits loses the distinction between 'core' and 'periphery', and awareness of growth's effect on the environment even more so.

Next, our analysis shows that when income inequality and risk of poverty are examined, environmental concern, willingness for material sacrifice and preparedness to trust each other all drop as inequality rises. In other words, preconditions of a prosperous degrowth are not correlated solely with income levels within a society, but also with inequality of distribution. Even more importantly, awareness of threats to environmental stability in poorer European states is higher than in the wealthier ones. These findings open up the space for debate about degrowth-conducive policies on European semi-periphery, burdened by lower income-levels and overall levels of human development.

Finally, a multivariate analyses on a smaller sample of countries indicates that beyond a certain development threshold, European nations' risk-perception of environmental threats, and pro-environmental behaviours are correlated with the extent to which these societies are exposed to liberal capitalism as the dominant social paradigm (Spangenberg 2005). Though these final findings do not focus explicitly on degrowth-potential of respective populations, they provide initial foundations for discussing differences in motivation for degrowth among European societies.

References:

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