

Environmental movements and commoning strategies in Puerto Rico: challenging the growth paradigm?

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Short Abstract

In this paper, I explore the potential for challenges to growth, in material and symbolic terms, presenting examples of recent environmental conflicts and policy debates in the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico relating to construction in coastal areas, where a crony state coalesces with a corrupt business sector to promote the enclosure and destruction of coastal ecosystems and the eviction of low-income communities to facilitate construction projects as the main strategy for economic growth. The paper shows how different movements challenge government-corporate proposals of exclusive mega-hotels and residential complexes by offering concrete alternatives based on a grassroots concept of community-based ‘sustainable development’ that emphasizes public access to the beach, community permanence, conservation of high-value natural areas, community involvement in the management of these areas, and community-based eco-tourism.

keywords: de-growth, common-pool resources, social movements, community-based resource management

narrative step: strategies for transformation

panel: Challenges to growth from the South: commodity frontiers, conflicts and alternatives

Long Abstract

Scholars from ecological economics and related disciplines have long questioned the dominant ‘growth’ system of capitalist economies. In recent years, this questioning has become the rallying call for a social and academic movement for ‘de-growth’. De-growth scholars have shown that economic growth is intricately tied to the ‘enclosure’ or outright destruction of the commons. Moreover, they have underscored that growth economics is supported by a State apparatus intimately tied to business interests that favor enclosure and privatization of CPRs as a central strategy of capitalist growth. Social movements theorists, ecological economists and political ecologists have highlighted how environmental movements can challenge large-scale extractivist projects tightly linked to these growth economics paradigm, but also how they create alternative development paths.

In Puerto Rico, the image of a paradise island – the “Island of Enchantment”- is contrasted with growing socio-economic, cultural, political, and environmental woes, an a large-scale model of developmentalism focused on construction and consumption where a crony state coalesces with a corrupt business sector, to promote the enclosure and destruction of coastal ecosystems and the eviction of low-income communities to facilitate construction projects as the main strategy for economic growth. In recent years, an increasing number of social-environmental movements have emerged to contest the current model of development and claim a right to conceive and implement their own vision of ‘development’, paralleling similar

movements in many parts of the world. Yet while much writing has been devoted to the concept of alter-development and alter-worlds, only a small proportion has empirically evaluated how the concept is defined and implemented in practice. In addition, most empirical research has focused on 'traditional' societies and groups.

In this paper, I am interested in analyzing two inter-related issues. First, what has been the form of developmentalism in Puerto Rico, and how has it impacted different sectors of society and the environment. Second, what has been the response from the marginalized sectors and associated social movements --what changes do these movements attempt and which ones have they achieved (their 'effects'), under what conditions "local knowledges and practices become part of alternative development strategies" (Peet & Watts, 1996, p. 11), and how do these alternatives contest (and/or cohabit with) developmentalism and the growth paradigm. In the process, I attempt to critically answer the questions of what constitutes a an alternative-development strategy and a counter-hegemonic project.

I summarize key insights from the literatures on social movements and alter-developments. I then apply these insights into the analysis of environmental movements in Puerto Rico, first from a broad national-level perspective and then through an analysis of three localized case studies of coastal conflicts over large-scale development projects in the Northeast region of the island. I use interviews with various activists from these movements to better understand how they conceive these alternative development projects and how they have been able to (or have failed to) implement them. The three case studies illustrate the diversity of what might be called alter-development strategies, while also highlighting the challenges of imposing a paradigm of de-growth in a context of a 'developing' country. In fact, I find that social movements still promote sustainable development as a viable alternative strategy. while this term is much criticized for being coopted and lacking meaning, I show that it is full of grassroots alternative meanings for the movements that use it, and that it serves as a counter-hegemonic discourse even while the government and businesses try to coopt the term and use it for their own purpose.