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The Labor(s) of Degrowth

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ABSTRACT

The degrowth debate so far has lacked a clear vision of what social subjects, and which processes of political subjectivation, can turn its vision into a political strategy. In this contribution to the debate on degrowth and eco-socialism, I point to the place of labor in the politics of socio-ecological revolution, arguing that degrowth should aim for a truly democratic, workers' controlled production system, where alienation is actively countered by a collective reappropriation of the products of labor and by a truly democratic decision-making process over the use of the surplus. Such strategy must be based on an extended concept of class relations that goes beyond the wage labor relation, and toward a broader conception of work as a (gendered and racialized) mediator of social metabolism. I conclude that ecosocialist degrowth should take the form of a struggle for dealienating both industrial and meta-industrial labor.

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Giorgios Kallis' response to John Bellamy Foster brings the discussion on degrowth directly to the core of my main research and theoretical concern: the place of labor in the politics of socio-ecological revolution. In my contribution to this forum, I will argue that the debate on ecosocialist degrowth must engage with the centrality of work and class in the transition to a post-carbon and post-capitalist paradigm. In other words, there can be no degrowth without dealienation (Brownhill, Turner, and Kaara 2012).

Kallis (2015) and Foster (2015) agree on advocating for an ecological socialism that might be able to democratically regulate the much-needed decrease in social metabolism: the central issue being how to carry out the social transformations that will lead to the desired result. While Foster emphasizes the need for a new "ecological revolution" inspired by the Communist manifesto and by a historical-materialist approach to earth-system science, Kallis asks which institutions will allow a democratic control over social metabolism to be better realized. Both authors also put forward a list

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of radical “policy proposals” that they consider achievable under the present conditions and necessary to “mobilize the general public” (in Foster’s words).

I believe that what is missing to move forward with this common plan is a clearer vision of what political subjects and which processes of political subjectivation can make it happen. In other words, rather than presupposing a “general public” as the recipient of any political strategy, we need to build such strategy upon a more solid analysis of the social forces involved, their mutual relations and their possible common interests. In what follows I will offer my contribution in this sense by reflecting on the place that labor movements and working-class people can and should have in degrowth politics and in the transformation of social metabolism more in general.

Kallis’ main argument that growth of biophysical throughput is still possible in a non-capitalist or even socialist economy is a useful starting point. The argument touches upon an important issue, of interest to all those who connect ecological struggles to an anti-capitalist perspective (from Naomi Klein to ecosocialists). It is reinforced by the observation that, for the most part, socialist regimes have shown levels of environmental devastation fundamentally similar to those of the capitalist world. In this sense, some authors have come to argue that, rather than Capitalocene, the Anthropocene should be actually renamed as Growthocene (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2016). Ecological critiques notwithstanding (materialist or otherwise), and especially with the development of nuclear power and synthetic chemicals in the post-WWII era, both systems followed the imperative of economic growth, which can be seen as the leading cause of ecological unsustainability and “environmental violence” (Barca 2014a).

If degrowth ultimately means eliminating the productive reinvestment of surplus value (as Kallis and his co-authors Demaria and D’Alisa argue in the epilogue to *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*), the problem arises of who decides on how the surplus should be dispensed with (*dépense*) and how (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014). This is clearly a political problem, as the authors rightly point out. And, I would add, it is one shared by all growth-oriented societies, both capitalist and centrally planned, because in both systems the producers (however defined) are typically estranged from decisions over the allocation of the surplus. In this sense, the emphasis that Kallis’ commentary puts on workers as decision-makers on surplus allocation sounds misplaced. In state socialism, decisions on what to do with the surplus have been alienated from workers as much as (if not more than) in capitalism. In capitalist systems, the surplus tends to be reinvested in increased production (but also spent in conspicuous consumption, charity, control of the media, etc.). In neither case do workers have much democratic control over the allocation of the surplus produced through their labor.

As Leigh Brownhill, Terisa Turner and Wahu Kaara explain in their contribution to a previous degrowth symposium hosted by *Capitalism Nature*

Socialism in 2012, dealienation is the process by which Marx's four forms of estrangement – from the products of labor and the natural world, from the labor process, from species-being and from other humans – are actively reversed through collective action. In their words, “De-alienation is about action by the exploited and dispossessed, both waged and unwaged,” aimed at un-enclosing resources and establishing new commoning practices and social relations (Brownhill, Turner, and Kaara 2012). Now, what exactly this entails is highly contingent on local situations and political choices regarding the extent to which the industrial division of labor will be accepted in the future degrowth society. Gorz (1982), a widely recognized inspiration for degrowthers, famously claimed that a certain grade of alienation from the labor process was inevitable in industrial societies. Nevertheless, the point here is that degrowth should aim for a truly democratic, worker-controlled production system where this alienation is actively countered by a collective reappropriation of the products of labor and by a truly democratic decision-making process over the use of the surplus. Estrangement from the products of labor is the specific aspect of alienation that concerns me here, in so far as it relates to the separation between the producers and the allocation of surplus that characterizes both capitalist and socialist regimes. My hypothesis is that the *alienation of the producers from the products of their work is what leads to the reinvestment of surplus into increased production*. Consequently, the project of building a degrowth society can only start from fostering dealienation by reopening the possibility for workers control and economic democracy, from the workplace to society at large.

This, I argue, is the reason why the degrowth movement must build a constructive dialogue with the alienated and exploited workers of the world. Here, in the messy reality of everyday re/productive work, complex contradictions arise that need to be addressed in fundamentally new ways. Different forms of metabolism clash with each other and produce environmental conflicts, which enter into communities' and people's lives, questioning identities, crushing certain life-forms and turning them into cogs of the dominant social metabolism.¹ This process takes different forms in the different but interconnected spaces of the global political economy. The fundamental political problem for degrowth is to gain a clear perspective on how the alienation of workers occurs, and how it can be reversed.

A good vantage point from which the contradictions in social metabolism can be analyzed is the perspective of those workers whose livelihood depends on fossil-driven economic growth, and whose voice rarely makes it to degrowthers' ears. While I was writing this article, one of those voices reached me from a distant place through an article published on *The Leap* website (Rojas 2016). It was that of a Mapuche oil worker from Patagonia,

¹I am grateful to Giacomo D'Alisa for pointing me to the issue of clashing social metabolisms.

who told a sad story of dispossession and destruction of local agriculture by Argentina's powerful oil business sector. Together with a history of racial discrimination and state repression, this left him and thousands of others no choice but to join the extractive industries. Working in the oil fields for 25 years, he came to know first-hand the devastating impact they had on his community's land and bodies, and he lost two family members to cancer due to the widespread contamination of water in the area. Despite all this, he considers himself to be fortunate in having a job that allows him to pay his bills and medical expenses, and to buy bottled water – especially when comparing his situation to that of local farmers who are literally on the verge of starvation. This gives us a measure of how difficult it is for many workers to even consider the possibility of losing their job, no matter how dirty and dangerous, in the absence of viable alternatives.

In this Mapuche man's experience, environmental violence was inextricably linked to alienation from the labor process: once hired, workers in the oil industry are made to sign a confidentiality agreement "that gives away (their) right to speak out publically"; in addition, they are trained in what the company calls "environmental safety," which means that whatever disaster may happen, the blame is immediately shifted on their supposed errors. The truth is, however, that disasters occur almost invariably (in this and many other cases) because management orders workers to keep production going despite reported faults or potential leaks. And, if they question choices internally, they face a variety of repercussions. This tells us that weak unions and virtually non-existent enforcement of labor regulations play a major role in determining the environmental impact of production.

Nevertheless, this worker is perfectly aware of the root causes of this situation, and of the negative balance left behind by promises of prosperity based on oil extraction. His quest is one for dealienation, in the sense of gaining control over not only the labor process and product, but also the political process where decisions are made over the best route to prosperity for his country. As he claims, "We, as people, have to question and ask ourselves: what gives us more prosperity?" The answer for him is in the development of a flourishing and diversified agriculture without oil, based on the rich natural resources of the country, rather than on soy and other soil-eroding monocrop plantations. This kind of sustainable agricultural development, he explains, is what would give people the opportunity to flourish by getting back "what's theirs" – i.e. the product of their labor. Following his vision, we might imagine, if not degrowth, at least a prosperous way out of fossil-driven economic growth, built upon a dealienated relationship of workers with the labor process and the product of their labor.

The centrality of dealienation in a discussion of degrowth becomes even clearer when we analyze the concrete historical examples in which dealienated workers have been able to enact sustainable modes of production, i.e. of

working-class environmentalism. While the history of 20th-century environmentalism is ridden with conflicts between environmental activists and workers, which have compromised any possibility for political alliance in many cases, it also shows important – if less well-known – stories of labor environmentalism, some of them opening the possibility for truly emancipative ways of organizing social metabolism. Probably, the most well-known example is that of the rubber tappers' struggles of the 1980s, which initiated the emancipative conservation experience of the Amazon "extractive reserves" (Barca 2014b). But other stories can be dug out of oblivion, and other voices from working-class and labor environmentalism can be heard. One recent example is that of the occupied factory Ri-Maflo in Italy, a former producer of auto components, which went bankrupt and laid off 320 workers in 2009. After the new owners had dismantled and taken away all machinery, a group of former workers organized a coop and occupied the space, with the idea of reappropriating it as a starting point for building new forms of production, consumption and waste disposal. Adopting the slogan "Re-use, re-cycle, re-appropriate," these workers have initiated a workshop of computer and appliance repair, a flea market, and the processing and distribution of local produce.² They also run the place as a space for community music and arts activities and social events, and for hospitality to refugees. Their plan is to collect enough resources to be able to turn these and other activities into a stable form of income, that is, to develop dealienated forms of work and production.

The matter is complicated by the fact that, even when they claim to be sensitive to climate and environmental issues, trade unions and labor parties in the capitalist world are mostly locked in the growth paradigm, rather than in an anti-capitalist perspective of dealienation. Their proposals for Green New Deal or Just Transition get trapped into the idea that a green capitalism is possible, by which they mean a set of public policies can be implemented that would reduce carbon emissions while stimulating the green economy and creating "decent" jobs. In other words, the majority of trade unions now aim for positive changes that would address the multiple current crises of ecology, economy and social inequalities without waiting for some systemic change that is difficult to envision and agree upon. I believe this perspective is not to be dismissed too easily, as it does represent the official position of large labor confederations and so-called blue-green alliances, which have the possibility to orient union policies at the national and local level, and might influence public investment choices among alternative options, e.g. between coal and solar power. The Just Transition proposal, for example, is premised upon the notion that the shift to a post-carbon economy will inevitably imply massive layoffs of workers who are dependent on the fossil economy,

²See <http://www.rimaflo.it/index.php/la-nostra-storia/>. Accessed May 30, 2016.

and thus consequent suffering in their communities. Degrowth cannot avoid considering this aspect of the transition to a non-fossil based and substantially different production system. Therefore, degrowth policy proposals must include concrete recommendations for dealing with those foreseen layoffs, sustaining the livelihoods of working-class communities in the transition process, and replacing fossil-generated wealth with different forms of income and welfare. All this compels us to engage with the discussions and positioning that are expressed by organized labor at different levels. Simply dismissing organized labor as a non-relevant actor in the transition to a post-carbon, post-capitalist or degrowth society will not do.

When taking into consideration the workers' perspective, we also need to be aware of the limited extent to which labor organizations represent the global working class, and of the differentiations and fractures that cross the non-homogeneous world of both organized and non-organized labor. One clear example is the Keystone XL pipeline controversy in the US, where five national trade unions have expressed vocal support, two have openly declared their opposition to it (both representing domestic workers, mostly women with an immigrant status), while the remaining unions have adopted a "none-of-our-business" attitude. This has caused extreme uneasiness and contrasting attitudes among the base (union locals and individual workers), for it has often posed them on the opposite side of the struggles conducted by their communities against the pipeline (Sweeney 2013). Similar examples of other configurations of positions assumed by organized labor in face of climate politics could be drawn, e.g. the One Million Climate Jobs campaign in South Africa. Here, the exacerbation of both economic and climate inequalities has led to an alliance between parts of the labor movement with environmental justice and green movements. This alliance has been able to reclaim the Just Transition strategy, filling it with radical anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal content. From a simple claim for jobs in a green growth agenda, the campaign has moved to advocate for public disinvestment from the fossil and nuclear sectors, coupled with energy democracy and food sovereignty at the community level (Cock 2014).

What these cases exemplify is the fact that there exist, at this historical juncture, concrete possibilities for articulating degrowth and labor politics in new ways, via grassroots mobilizations in community unionism and social movement unionism, pushing labor organizations toward a radical critique of the growth paradigm (Bayon 2014). This articulation is a crucial starting point for developing new forms of political-ecological consciousness that go beyond the current divisions between organized labor and degrowth and environmental justice movements. In fact, they would allow for the development of an emancipatory ecological class consciousness, premised upon a reconceptualization of work in the sense of dealienation and commoning, which is a necessary prerequisite for a socially just degrowth strategy. The

articulation of degrowth and labor politics toward an ecological class consciousness implies the important task of reconsidering ideas of class in general, and of working class in particular. Class is still an important reality for most of the world population, even as it intersects with multiple other social differentiations. Simply ignoring class politics will do a disservice to degrowth, e.g. it will obscure the (largely) white middle-class nature of the movement and thus its possibilities for political action.

In order to reconsider class and its intersection with degrowth, a good starting point is enlarging the concept of class relations beyond the wage labor relation and toward a broader conception of work as a mediator of social metabolism. Biophysical throughput is largely the result of work done in the factory, the field, the office, the retail center and the household, but workers have very limited control over the process. In capitalist societies, wage relations and growth-oriented state politics alienate workers from both the labor process and product. As ecofeminist political economy has abundantly shown, production takes over and dominates reproduction, the surplus is accumulated or reinvested in the infinite expansion of the system. This has negative consequences for the quality and quantity of resources available for the reproduction of life and for the entire biosphere. Logically speaking, working-class people – those who are located at the bottom of the global labor hierarchy and who pay the higher price to its social costs – have a vested interest in the subversion of this system. This is what I call an emancipatory ecological class consciousness: the awareness that climate change (and environmental violence in general) is the newest form of class war – as always, articulated with gender and racial domination – and that it needs to be combated via struggles for dealienation and communing (Barca 2015). Being locked in the growth society, however, working-class people have a limited ability to make sense of and struggle against the current organization of social metabolism, as the Mapuche oil worker's testimony makes clear. That is why contributing to the emergence of ecological class consciousness is, I argue, a crucial task for a degrowth movement that rejects authoritarian solutions to the ecological crisis and aims at building large social alliances around a truly emancipatory transition to a post-carbon economy.

In embracing the challenge of raising ecological class consciousness, degrowthers can count on the fundamental support of feminist praxis. Feminist political economy, especially in its articulations with ecofeminism and feminist political ecology, has offered invaluable contributions for a rethinking of work, and intersects in new ways with the degrowth debate (D'Alisa, Demaria, and Deriu 2014). Through dialogue with postcolonial studies, this literature has produced a thorough critique of GDP and development politics as inextricably linked to undervaluation of subsistence economies and reproductive (mostly women's) work, what Salleh (2010) has named "meta-

industrial labor.” From a Marxist perspective, the work of reproduction is mostly (even if not entirely) carried out outside of wage relations, but is inextricably linked to them via the constant need for capital to appropriate this work in order to sustain production and accumulation (Fraser 2014; see also Moore 2015). Ecofeminist scholars see the ecological crisis as a global manifestation of the gendered division of labor, and thus a major cause of the crisis of social reproduction (Bauhardt 2014). What ecofeminist and feminist political economists have in common is the identification of reproduction as a crucial terrain for anti-capitalist struggle and ecological revolution (Merchant 2010; Federici 2012; Withcherich 2015). Overall, what ecofeminist political economy tells us is that combating the capital/state appropriation of the reproductive and care labor carried out by the global meta-industrial working class is a crucial step toward the dealienation of the labor process and toward taking control over the surplus in a global commoning perspective. In this sense, degrowth should listen to the voices coming from the emancipatory ecological class consciousness that is already guiding the struggles of many women-led movements on the margins of the global political economy (Harcourt and Nelson 2014).

Ultimately, my argument here boils down to a single overarching question: “What is the political subject of a degrowth revolution?” I think this subject should not be confined to an ecologically minded global middle class willing to reduce consumerism and work-addiction, and/or to engage in direct action to express its disappointment with economic/environmental policies. This has historically played an important avant-garde role in raising consciousness of the degrowth perspective and in allying with a variety of other movements and ideas. But, this approach will remain politically weak unless it manages to enter into dialogue with a broadly defined global working class – including both wage labor and the myriad forms of work that support it – and its organizations. This is a very difficult endeavor in the present conditions, but it might become a concrete possibility if we accept the implications of degrowth for the meta-industrial workers of the world and if the degrowth debate takes on a clearer direction toward emancipation from both the alienation of wage labor and the capitalist (or state) appropriation of reproductive labor. This is what is needed in order to decrease social metabolism while increasing social well-being and equality.

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