

Conclusion: The Global Rise of Postgrowth Imaginaries

The great secret and the great accomplishment of capitalist civilization have been to *not* pay its bills. Frontiers made that possible. The closure is the end of Cheap Nature—and with it the end of capitalism’s free ride.

—Jason W. Moore¹

Cultural hegemony is being contested and challenged in post-2008 Spain by a significant number of cultural manifestations. *Postgrowth Imaginaries* has explored how many of these emerging cultural sensibilities in Spain are actively detaching themselves from the dominant imaginary of economic growth. The first part of the book, ‘Spanish Culture and Postgrowth Economics’, combines cultural studies and postgrowth economics to articulate a degrowth-inspired Iberian ecocriticism able to expose the contradictions of mainstream Euro-American environmentalism. This ecocritical approach reveals that the main obstacles to articulating a political ecology able to deal effectively with the most pressing social and ecological issues arise not only from right-wing denialism but also, and more disturbingly, from progressive techno-optimism. The second part, ‘Urban Ecologies’, invites scholars of urban culture to think of modern cities in terms of socionatural metabolisms embedded in unsustainable energy regimes and growth imaginaries. Such a framework enables a critical review of cultural representations of urbanity as well as an assessment of their effectiveness in challenging the dominant imaginary. The last part of the book, ‘Waste, Disaster, Refugees, and Nonhuman Agency’, advocates considering the socioecological significance of nonhuman agency and embracing a political ecology of waste to productively disrupt the dominant imaginary. I also urged cultural activists and scholars to move from a reactive

1 Moore, ‘Nature in the Limits to Capital (and Vice Versa)’, 19.

fear-infused pedagogy of catastrophe to a more empowering, playful, and proactive pedagogy of degrowth. Moving into the future, the combination of a decolonial ecocriticism and a critical politics of hope may be able to overcome mainstream apolitical techno-optimism. For a critique of the growth imaginary is necessary but not sufficient; imagining and enacting desirable postgrowth societies is also vital.²

This book demonstrates that a postgrowth imaginary is emerging on the Iberian Peninsula today and offers several ways of reading its cultural implications from a degrowth-inspired environmental humanities perspective. The complex interrelations among cultural practices, economic paradigms, and ecological processes are vastly under-theorized. I have tried my best in this book to provide an innovative and functional frame, articulated around the notion of postgrowth imaginaries, that can illuminate these important connections. My hope is that this intervention will foster a more systemic, posthumanist, and ecological understanding of culture that helps Iberian cultural studies to effectively mobilize its emancipatory political potential.

I also believe that beyond Iberian studies, the notion of *postgrowth imaginaries* will prove fruitful for the field of cultural studies in general and make a valuable contribution to transnational debates within the environmental humanities. The radical cultural change I identify in my book is by no means limited to this region of Southern Europe, but rather represents a global pattern expressed around the world in different cultural fashions based on distinct historical conjunctions. I hope that the interpretative frame developed in *Postgrowth Imaginaries* will be enriched by incorporating insights from other regions to better understand the unfolding global challenges to the dominant growth paradigm and their diverse articulations of alternative economic cultures. The notion of postgrowth imaginaries might even serve as a conceptual anchor for a coalition of socioecological movements united by their radical critique of neoliberal reason as they mobilize their collective intelligence and effort in order to envision and materialize desirable and sustainable economic cultures beyond growth.³ The goal of such a coalition would be to articulate a cohesive critique of the

2 A new collaborative project was initiated in Spain in 2016 with the goal of exploring this affirmative politics of representation: *Environmental humanities: Strategies for ecological empathy and the transition towards sustainable societies*. Hopefully, we will see many more projects like this proliferating in the near future. See <http://ecohumanidades.webs.upv.es/>.

3 Arturo Escobar, 'Development, Critiques of', in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (New York: Routledge, 2015), 31; Martínez-Alier, 'Environmental Justice and Economic Degrowth', 66.

growth imaginary while carrying out diverse, decentralized experiments with alternative postcapitalist models. In other words, I envision a united global critique of the cultural hegemony combined with a synergetic network of alternatives: an ecology of knowledges, beyond Northern epistemologies, bringing about diverse postgrowth imaginaries and practices.⁴

The systemic crisis of growth calls for a collective effort to overcome the dominant ideology of disconnection through the creation of decolonizing practices, postgrowth narratives, and aesthetics of interdependence. To change the dominant imaginary is not an easy task. It requires us to imagine and create assertive visions of the future,⁵ new vocabularies and different uses of language,⁶ counter-narratives of recovery able to displace mainstream toxic discourses,⁷ and ‘realizable forms of politics that reject human exceptionality’.⁸ It also demands patience during the cultivation of alternative models of social reproduction and the constant preparation of spaces for testing post-capitalist paradigms, as well as the creation and promotion of specific strategies and policy proposals.

As I was writing this book many things happened that provided further justification for its arguments, most of them under the radar of corporate media. When I started writing *Postgrowth Imaginaries*, 85 people owned more wealth than 50 percent of the human population; by the time I was writing this conclusion the figure had shrunk to eight people.⁹ The year 2016 was the warmest on record and atmospheric carbon dioxide levels surpassed the critical 400 ppm threshold.¹⁰ Some of the worst ecological disasters ever recorded took place: Indonesia was ravaged by forest fire, monster hurricanes devastated entire regions, and Brazil experienced a

4 Santos, *Another Knowledge Is Possible*. The think tank Foro Transiciones (<http://forotransiciones.org/>) in Spain, Unitierra in Oaxaca, and the international Great Transition Initiative (<http://greattransition.org/>) are among the many existing spaces already cultivating much-needed seeds for a postgrowth socioecological transition.

5 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 74–75.

6 Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics*, 42.

7 LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 192–193.

8 Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 134.

9 Oxfam International. ‘Just 8 Men Own Same Wealth as Half the World Population’, 16 January, 2017, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2017-01-16/just-8-men-own-same-wealth-half-world>.

10 James Hansen et al., ‘Global Temperature in 2016’, January 18, 2017, http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2017/20170118_Temperature2016.pdf; Earth System Research Laboratory, Global Monitoring Division, ‘Trends in Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide’, U.S. National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, <https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/ccgg/trends/index.html>.

massive ecological disaster due to the rupture of a reservoir for storing toxic mining waste, just to mention a few examples. Meanwhile, the Paris 2015 Climate Summit confirmed the global persistence and hegemony of the growth imaginary and its delusional effects on our political leaders (many of the same leaders were simultaneously promoting and discussing new transoceanic neoliberal trade agreements). The Paris Agreement tries once more to solve the climate problem without questioning the growth ideology at its roots. It actually perpetuates a managerial and techno-fix—ecomodernist—approach, and is unable to imagine a desirable world without growth. The Paris Agreement bears an underlying assumption: future global economic growth and massive international trade is taken for granted and must go on no matter what, even in a collapsing biosphere full of environmental and developmental refugees. In the meantime, global inequality rises, the subsidization of fossil fuels is between four and six times greater than that of renewable energy, and xenophobic discourses proliferate in Europe and North America.

The lack of significant media attention to vital events—or its fragmentation, decontextualization, and disconnection—is nothing new. However, corporate media (let alone ‘fake news’) does not only conceal the root causes of our socioecological problems, it also ignores or undermines the massive resistance to the growth imaginary and the creative alternatives that are emerging everywhere. Many hopeful things also happened while I was writing this book: 2015 was both the International Year of Soils (let me state the obvious: our well-being and survival depend much more on the health of the topsoil than on the continuous growth of the economic dynamics that erode it) and the year in which the pope of the Roman Catholic Church released an encyclical letter identifying the dominant economic system as the root of most ongoing environmental degradation and human suffering. It seems that the abstractions and fantasies of orthodox economics are soon exposed once we pay due attention to the material (‘soiled’) ground level of our social and ecological reality. Recently, a few prestigious global media outlets have started covering the suicidal growth inertia of capitalism. Even *Forbes*, a venue that overtly celebrates and perpetuates the growth imaginary, published an op-ed in 2016 titled ‘Unless it Changes, Capitalism Will Starve Humanity by 2050’.¹¹ Since 2008, academic conferences and publications exploring degrowth have been rapidly increasing in number, and over the last couple of years I was pleased to see that several nonacademic books critical of the socioecological disaster-producing machine of capitalism

11 Drew Hansen, ‘Unless it Changes, Capitalism Will Starve Humanity by 2050’, *Forbes*, February 9, 2016.

and its associated techno-optimism became international bestsellers—for instance, Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014), Paul Mason's *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (2015), and Andrew Keen's *The Internet Is Not the Answer* (2015).¹²

Massive protests in Brazil opposing the growth-driven construction of pharaonic and socioecologically harmful infrastructures for the 2016 Olympic Games contrast dramatically with the celebratory rhetoric of progress and modernization trumpeted during Spanish media's presentation of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games. Back in 1992 nobody in Southern Europe was talking about degrowth, while now the degrowth movement is gaining momentum in 'overdeveloped' countries and discussions about postdevelopment, postextractivism, and decolonial redefinitions of what living well entails are proliferating in Latin America and everywhere else. In the last few years, climate justice movements have mushroomed, indigenous environmental networks and movements are gaining visibility and popularity, food security and food sovereignty movements are rising, and a number of municipalities, both large and small, are experimenting with postcarbon and participatory urban models. In postindustrial cities, an increasing number of people are interested in permaculture, biomimicry, and agroecology, and pro-common initiatives are demonstrating that collective intelligence can collaboratively repurpose nonconvivial capitalist technologies and neoliberal spaces, transforming them into decentralized tools and communitarian places able to enhance social and ecological well-being. Locally owned, decentralized renewable energy, care, and food cooperatives are thriving. As John Holloway warns, to crack capitalism there is no right recipe, 'just millions of experiments'.¹³

People everywhere are not only resisting the growth imaginary materially and semiotically, but generating (or regenerating) postgrowth narratives and postcapitalist ways of relating to others (humans and nonhumans) in order to guarantee their social reproduction. Plural economic theories and practices—from feminist to common good economics—are gaining visibility. Nonacademic and non-Western pedagogies are claiming their space. New independent media outlets are challenging corporate media accounts (good Spanish examples include *eldiario.es* and *Saltamos*). Artists are striving to make visible the slow violence that neoliberalism manufactures and hides. Students are demanding not only a public education, but one that

12 Klein, *This Changes Everything*; Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); Andrew Keen, *The Internet Is Not the Answer* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015).

13 John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 256.

is transformational and decolonial as well. Medical staff and patients are turning to counterhegemonic medicine and mindfulness in order to detach their physical and mental health from growth-driven, disempowering, energy-intensive, and technocratically managed mainstream corporate medicine. Transition towns, slow cities, ecovillages, urban community gardens, and repair cafes are thriving.

Given that the ecological regime of capitalism is coming to an end because it created a global economic metabolism that could not be sustained by the ecological systems of the Earth, constant economic growth is not an option, biophysically speaking, going into the near future. A degrowing economic future should be expected, whether we want it or not. The question we face is how we can transition to a desirable society with very limited or no economic growth. If we go on with business as usual and maintain our dominant imaginary of economic growth, applying its pathological logic in a context of extreme social corrosion and increased ecological restrictions, the future prospects of humanity are not very appealing. Probably, under that scenario, the technocratic and managerial tendencies of neoliberal biopolitics will translate into some kind of extreme eco-totalitarianism in which the anthropological machine will work in an accelerated mode to produce the many less-than-humans and infra-humans to be sacrificed for the sake of the survival of a few privileged humans (this is already happening!). The other option is to unleash our collective intelligence and abilities and start a collaborative dialogue to envision and activate postgrowth imaginaries and postcapitalist practices. Through them we may be able to imagine and enact desirable societies with circular metabolisms that enhance the environment rather than depleting it. These emerging postgrowth socioecological initiatives will direct the focus on facilitating the communitarian reproduction of a life worthy of being lived, not the private accumulation of capital.

The question of what constitutes a good life will have to be discussed by all members of any community, intentionally formed or not, but two criteria must be agreed upon as preconditions for any acceptable notion of the good life, as Amaia Pérez Orozco recommends: universality and respect of singularities.¹⁴ The first premise entails that the conditions of possibility for our own good life should not undermine the conditions of possibility for other communities to live well; in other words, a consumerist lifestyle that depletes the Earth and depends on labor exploitation is not acceptable. The second condition counters the tendency of historically distinct, but persistent and perverse, social mechanisms to transform difference into

14 Pérez Orozco, *Subversión feminista de la economía*, 23.

inferiority and inequality through structural violence and oppression. As I interpret these self-imposed preconditions for defining collectively what a good life entails, the first point focuses on the need to voluntarily limit the social metabolism within which we reproduce the conditions for our postgrowth society, in order to make it socially and ecologically just. This includes avoiding exploiting humans and nonhumans within or without the borders of that society. The second point, it seems to me, is a preventive strategy, learned by paying attention to the lessons of colonial and neocolonial history in relation to iterative mechanisms of structural oppression. To put it another way, while capitalism and colonialism go hand in hand, nothing guarantees that moving beyond capitalism and growth will automatically bring about decolonization and justice. Thus, we have to make sure that we construct not only postgrowth imaginaries, but also decolonial imaginaries.

It is important to prevent the anthropological machine from articulating its hierarchical inclusive/exclusive distinctions. A historical perspective on oppressive practices teaches us that once distinctions are made, they soon become fossilized justifications for the structural oppression and exploitation of all humans and nonhumans that fall on the wrong side of the line. The main problem is that the distinctions are eventually translated through social imaginaries into institutional normativity (constituting a dominant imaginary). They become naturalized (invisibilized) and self-reproducing in a way that makes it more and more difficult both to track their historicity and to challenge them in the political arena that those very institutions monopolize and deactivate. That is why any emancipatory project needs to remain vigilant against the temptation to turn to the kind of dichotomous reasoning—human-nonhuman, society-nature—that can easily fire up the anthropological machine. If we fail to monitor our evolving postgrowth politics in the Anthropocene, we risk provoking unintended consequences that could trigger new versions of the oppressive mechanisms we wanted to fight in the first place—ecological sovereignty, ecofascism, extreme neoliberal biopolitics, environmentality, risky geoengineering, and so on. Thus, we should envision not only decolonial postgrowth imaginaries, but also posthumanist imaginaries.

To create the conditions of possibility for a desirable postgrowth society, it is crucial that we collectively repoliticize, in Jacques Rancière's sense. This entails challenging 'the distribution of the sensible' involved in the dominant imaginary of economic growth and its symbolic order that determines and prearranges what can be visible, sayable, audible, or thinkable. The dominant imaginary has constricted our aesthetico-political possibilities, confining us in an epistemological trap where we reduce our creativity to

the iterative task of arranging different ways of growing the economy. To be able to ‘reconfigure the map of the sensible’ we need to persistently disrupt and disturb the dominant imaginary with postgrowth stories, narratives, and practices that redefine what can be said and seen. Rancière writes that ‘Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct “fictions”, that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done’.¹⁵ If we accept that the ‘real must be fictionalized in order to be thought’,¹⁶ we had better start constructing affirmative and desirable postgrowth stories and practices, as well as creating coherent narratives about both the nowtopias that are materializing everywhere and the postgrowth living laboratories that are already transforming the world. They are real phenomena, but they need to influence meaning-making beyond their performative spaces if they are to become culturally relevant and politically significant.

Postgrowth Imaginaries pushes to enlarge the space of what is visible, thinkable, intelligible, perceptible, sayable, and, more importantly, desirable. I hope that if we persist in the construction of postgrowth imaginaries, we may eventually be able to displace the dogmatic neoliberal sequestration of reality and its monologic motto, ‘there is no alternative’. Politics, as Rancière insists, ‘replaces the dogmatism of truth with the search for conditions of possibility’.¹⁷ We desperately need to envision postgrowth imaginaries in which to invest our affects, identities, energy, and creativity. Our (good) life quite literally depends on it. Our lack of political imagination (or, more accurately, our obduracy in maintaining our attachment to the harmful growth imaginary) is undermining such conditions of possibility. My hope is that this book does its humble part in contributing to our communitarian and collaborative search for the conditions of possibility for socially desirable and ecologically viable postgrowth societies to emerge.

15 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 39.

16 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 38.

17 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 50.