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Why the Post-growth Debate Is Not a Wrong Turn

In their paper Jakob and Edenhofer (2014) argue that reflecting on conflicts between “degrowth” and “green growth” concepts is a useless thing. Instead of discussing the growth issue it would make much more sense to focus on what they call a

“welfare diagnostics” approach that defines minimum requirements for basic needs. No doubt, this approach has its merits. It is more or less similar to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. But since the authors leave out real-world conflicts and interests as well as the economic drivers of growth, capital accumulation and consumerism, their approach appears quite apolitical. To keep quiet about growth imperatives and their compulsive dimensions is not an adequate answer to the challenges of sustainability.

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Positioning oneself in the middle, as the voice of reason halfway between the two poles of a heated dispute, is a familiar manoeuvre in academic and political circles, and one that usually pays off. According to preference, one can position oneself as a dialectician who synthesises the seemingly irreconcilable on a higher level, or as a peacemaker who offers the hitherto purblind antagonists practical escape routes out of the ideological prisons they have constructed for themselves. And in the world of politics, therefore, the middle has a good ring to it. It is there, as we often hear, that elections are won. One keeps one’s distance from supposed or real extremes. In the academic world, an orientation towards where one believes the middle ground to lie, towards the mainstream, is regarded by many as a little boring, but in practice it usually pays off unequivocally in terms of appointments, publications and citations. The networks function smoothly. Little changes.

However – and this is especially true from the perspective of the need for political and scientific progress – there is a very different way of looking at the ubiquitous fixation on the middle ground, where it is easy to avoid having to make fundamental choices. This can be best described by quoting the German Baroque poet Friedrich von Logau (1604 to 1655), who observed laconically in one of his epigrams (Eitner 1872, p. 421):

*“In Danger and Deep Distress,
the Middleway Spells Certain Death.”*

I have to admit that this quotation sprang to mind as soon as I had read the article by my colleagues Jakob and Edenhofer (2014), whom I regard not only as highly competent scholars in matters of sustainability and climate protection, but as motivated in their work by deep personal conviction. A very detailed and highly annotated argument is put forward here to the effect that both camps – those supporting the post-growth idea as well as those supporting the concept of “green growth” – should abandon their presumably insufficiently thought-through positions and instead should adopt the “welfare diagnostics” approach proposed here. Turn back and cease your fruitless disputation, the authors cry out to the antagonists in the growth debate: the issue at stake is not the one you’re arguing about, but something else entirely. And the real stakes, and therefore the rhetorical pitch, are certainly high.

The core of the concept presented by Jakob and Edenhofer (2014) is a process which, although conducted in the public sphere, is suffused with science (“deliberative”), and in which it is no longer limits to growth and opportunities for growth which are at the forefront of the debate, but instead the identification of minimum requirements, and associated thresholds for provision, with respect to basic needs. The proposed approach is confidently described as a “‘pragmatic enlightened model’ of scientific policy advice” (Jakob and Edenhofer 2014, p. 464) and recommended as applicable in the real world.

However, with slightly less benevolence than the authors display in their self-appraisal (“pragmatic” and “enlightened”), one might conclude that their approach is a little on the harmless side, and that it tends to sweep potential political conflicts over goals under the carpet rather than exposing them. Certainly, the

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text contains much that is correct and well-founded, and that is shared without reservation by the present author – e. g., the emphasis on the role of economic instruments in climate protection, the demonstration of the need for new conceptions of welfare and for investment in public goods, and a consistent focus on the interests of the global South;¹ but there is also much that has simply been left out of these reflections. In the following brief comments, I would like to concentrate on what has been left out.

The Political Public Sphere Needs Controversy and Debate

The dramatic gulf in the climate policy debate between what ought to be (a reduction of 60 to 80 percent in global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and the restriction of the man-made rise in temperature to between 1.5 and maximum two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels) and what unfortunately appears likely (rising emissions and a temperature increase on course for 3.7 to 4.8 degrees Celsius by 2100) leads not infrequently to intellectu-

If only to satisfy the requirements of a democratic public sphere, a critical debate on growth is urgently needed as a counterweight to the fixation with a technology-centric green growth ideology, providing a minimal measure of symmetry and balance. It is important for a society to question not only how the many objects surrounding us can be technically improved but also whether we really need all of them (Loske 2013). Now, it could always be objected here, from an economic perspective, that the evaluation of pluralistic approaches ranging from efficiency to sufficiency is of course not an issue of economics but a matter of political taste. But that would be a fundamental error.

The green growth mentality leads to entirely different economic behaviours from those which arise out of a post-growth mentality. The former is about technical and competitive approaches, the latter about socio-cultural practices; the former is concerned with energy-saving devices and machines, windmills and electric cars, eco-architecture and organic supermarkets, the latter more with shared use and collaborative consumption, with a new culture of do-it-yourself and make-do-and-mend, with frugality and liberation from excess. It is not at all clear yet whether at the end

Political ideas which exclude aspects like unsustainable lifestyles, economic interests vested in exploitation and untenable global economic relations always fall short with respect to sustainability and climate protection and end up mired in technocracy.

al “evasive action”. The most frequently observed reaction to the climate crisis is a technologically-based “decoupling optimism”, full of enthusiasm for green growth, green technology and green markets.

Its basic hypothesis is that the economy can continue to grow, possibly even faster than at the prevailing trend because of ecological innovations, and environmental degradation and resource depletion can be uncoupled from this growth and consequently fall. This philosophy of “green growth” has now been adopted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Commission and the Federal German government, and in some countries it is well on the way to establishing itself as a new industrial policy consensus. The many empirical arguments which critique this kind of supposedly green growth mentality and which are based on the so-called rebound effect (which describes how technological efficiency gains are outweighed by growth effects, cf. Santarius 2014) have to date found little resonance in the public debate.

of the day it will be technical innovations which make the greater contribution to climate protection and sustainability or socio-cultural innovations, which are only just beginning to make their way out of their respective niches into the mainstream (Loske 2015).

In my view, Jakob and Edenhofer’s central conclusion – that abandoning the ubiquitous drive for growth would bring no ecological benefits – is premature, since the momentum that may be developed by new social practices such as sharing or the voluntary reduction of consumption depends not least on the institutional political framework, which is something that also lies in our hands. But their rejection of post-growth strategies is not really so surprising if a realistic analysis of the text is undertaken, as what they themselves propose – despite being based on a social explanation of the need for growth – is ultimately very closely related to the concept of green growth.

A Failure to Take into Account the Main Drivers of Growth

The fundamental approach of identifying minimum thresholds of provision for the satisfaction of basic needs and securing them with the least possible environmental damage and resource use is one that is both appealing and at the same time sensible. Access

¹ Together with others, I attempted 1995 in the study *Zukunftsfähiges Deutschland* (Loske et al. 1997, published in English as Sachs, Loske, Linz 1998) to show how such a conception of sustainability could be applied to an industrialised country like Germany.

to energy, water, hygiene, health services and education is precisely the starting point of the UN's millennium goals, now superseded by more comprehensive goals for sustainable development (UNDP 2015). In that sense Jakob and Edenhofer (2014) are building on an established discourse, while of course developing it further.

Here, too, it is not what the authors are proposing that should be criticised, but rather what they are leaving out. In addition to thresholds, should there not also be ceilings, or upper limits? In addition to underconsumption, that is, too little for the poor, it is well-known that there is also overconsumption, that is, too much for the rich. The failure to address this excess is a weakness not only of the authors' argument but of the entire sustainability discourse, at least in its mainstream part. To be sure, if you understand "pragmatic and enlightened" policy advice to mean not confronting politicians with too many uncomfortable truths, then you will prefer to enthuse about eco-innovation and the green markets of the future rather than to speak about the culture of waste, about injustice in the international division of labour, or about overconsumption. Praising green technologies will certainly guarantee that you remain on the safe side and at least potentially "linked in" to the mainstream debates on growth and employment, but the corollary is that only half the story is being told. And most importantly, what is being told is not enough.

It is essential that the other half of the story is also told and examined, where it is all about unsustainable lifestyles, the drivers of capitalist accumulation, economic interests vested in exploitation, and untenable global economic relations. In my view, political ideas which exclude these aspects always fall short with respect to sustainability and climate protection and end up mired in technocracy. As I have said already, this is not a specific criticism of Jakob and Edenhofer (2014); they make some of these points themselves. But it is no longer possible to ignore the fact that many of the operative features of capitalism as we know it to-

day, from the growth imperative to the creation of ever-widening income disparities, cannot be reconciled with sustainability and climate protection goals. What is required is nothing less than the creation of a socio-ecological regulatory framework for the economy, or a re-embedding of the economy within society and nature (Loske 2014).

The Non-economic Dimensions of the Critique of Growth

To elaborate on my last point: perhaps the fact that Jakob and Edenhofer's essay was published in the *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* explains why it references only Anglo-Saxon literature on the post-growth debate, and why cultural dimensions to the critique of growth are excluded. But it is precisely in the analysis of the post-growth debate that this proves to be a distinct weakness.

Notwithstanding the undoubted merits of Herman Daly, Tim Jackson and the Skidelskys, father and son, as champions of the post-growth debate, it is impossible to read the paper by Jakob and Edenhofer (2014) without noticing that they fail to reflect any of the German or francophone discussion of the topic, even though at certain points these discussions set very different emphases from those in the British and North American debates, e. g., with respect to issues of subsidiarity, subsistence, sufficiency, the feminist perspective and an orientation towards the common good. Authors such as Hans Christoph Binswanger, Serge Latouche, Meinhard Miegel, Niko Paech, Wolfgang Sachs, Irmi Seidl or Angelika Zahrnt² are ignored, even though their work has considerable resonance on the continent. Critiques of growth and alter-

² For their response to Jakob and Edenhofer's essay cf. Seidl and Zahrnt (2015), in this issue.

Liebe Leserinnen und Leser,

wir danken Ihnen für Ihre Treue und Ihr Interesse an unserer Zeitschrift GAIA – und wir freuen uns, Ihnen auch 2016 wieder zeigen zu können, wo die Umweltforschung heute steht und was sie zur Lösung von Umweltproblemen beitragen kann!

Frohe Weihnachten und einen guten Rutsch ins neue Jahr wünscht

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native viewpoints from other parts of the world, too, such as the South American “Buen vivir”, the Chinese concept of the “harmonious society” or the global “Eco villages’ movement”, which meets with an especially big response in India, are not considered, even though it is precisely in these movements and viewpoints that relations between humanity and nature that go beyond the purely material are considered. In this respect, Jakob and Edenhofer (2014) fail to do justice to the plurality and diversity of the post-growth debate.

This applies also to the historical dimension of the growth critique. This was never a discussion only about the bio-physical limits to growth, but included reflections on the *Social Limits to Growth* (Hirsch 1976) and on the question of whether individuals or societies faced a choice between *To Have or To Be* (Fromm 1976), or rather what was the relation between the two. It was about a “politics of self-regulation” (Illich 1973), about the *Overdeveloped Nations* (Kohr 1978) and about the realisation that *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher 1973). It is even possible that the recognition of the social and cultural limits to the expansionist model of development was at the end of the day more influential than the famous report on the *Limits to Growth* to the Club of Rome in 1972 (Meadows et al. 1972).

My conclusion is that Jakob and Edenhofer’s article (2014) is on the one hand a valuable addition to the debate, principally because – building on much preceding work by others – it places the issue of human needs at the forefront of the sustainability debate and treats growth not as an end in itself but as a servant of social goals, which are to be achieved as far as possible in a climate compatible way. In effect it calls for a change of focus in the growth debate: away from the question of for or against growth and towards the question of what kind of growth do we need for social purposes, and what is the most climate compatible and resource-conserving way to achieve it. I see the weaknesses in the concept as lying less in what is set out as in what is excluded or missing. This includes firstly the “mechanics” of the political process, which urgently require a degree of adversarial escalation. The idea that political progress might be less conflictual if we would only stop talking about growth and talk instead about minimum thresholds for the satisfaction of basic needs is certainly courageous; one might even call it divorced from politics. Real-world interests and real-world conflicts exist, and they don’t go away even if they are given new academic definitions. Additionally, the concept of minimum thresholds fails to acknowledge the other side of the coin – that is, upper limits, or ceilings. For there is not only underconsumption, but also overconsumption; not only too little, but also too much.³ This is not addressed, and neither are the systemic pressures for growth within capitalism. As a final word, it can be added that the article fails to reflect adequately, either chronologically or geographically, the plurality and diversity of the growth

critique. Of course, this may be attributable to the focus on academic economics of its place of publication. However, if – as is the case here – an apodictic statement is made at the very beginning that renouncing growth would do very little to help the environment, then the authors must be asked why they have selected such a narrow bibliography to back up such a far-reaching statement.

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³ This issue was examined in detail as early as 2002 by the *Jo’burg Memo Group* led by Wolfgang Sachs in their report *Fairness in a Fragile World* (Sachs et al. 2002).