

Post-Growth on the Move

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SUMMARY

Leaving Sustainability's Cloudiness

Almost four decades ago, "Limits to Growth" was published by the Club of Rome in 1972. This milestone of environmental history gives reason to be concerned as a student in sustainability science. Ecological economists have long argued, economic growth is doing more harm than good. Distinguished academics such as Herman Daly (1974) came up with a plausible theoretical foundation for the critique on economic growth. In order to approach sustainability, one has to acknowledge, he says, that the ecological sphere sets the limits to the economic activities. Although we have known all this for a while, humanity is still not living within the ecological boundaries. Ecological Economists have not become mainstream. Instead, the cloudy and ambivalent claims of the proponents of "sustainable development" (WCED 1987) determined the sustainability discourse. "Sustainable development still leaves us largely with the same problems as, or worse than, at the start of the (...) era" (Martínez-Alier et al. 2010, 1745). But finally, sustainable development is facing strong opposition. Since the beginning of the 21st century, one observes a renaissance of the critique of economic growth (Müller 2011, 1) building on the thick achievements of ecological economics; a debate about a post-growth economy¹ is emerging in several European countries such as France, Spain and England, in Canada and recently in Germany (Kerschner 2010, 544, Jackson 2009, Seidl/Zahrnt 2010, Victor 2008).

Bridging Ideas and Movements

This thesis starts off with two preliminary assumptions. First, post-growth is a plausible approach towards sustainability. Second, social movements are major agents of change for a post-growth economy and especially the environmental movement can trigger a process towards it. Given that both statements are feasible, one would expect a social movement to take up the post-growth ideas immediately, but it does not, as this thesis will show. Thus, my research aim is to explore, in what way the fact that the German environmental movement did not adopt the cause of a post-growth economy yet requires further operationalization of post-growth theory. Furthermore, the research aim is to explore, how the German environmental movement can activate mechanisms for realizing post-growth. The project focuses on Friends of the Earth Germany (FoE) as main agent of change for post-growth within the environmental movement. Hence, I am not seeing a shortage of understanding of the problem or too few concepts for sustainability, but I largely miss the paths to get there. This argument is supported by Daly (2010), who says that "the bridge between ideas and social movements is critical, hard to understand and hard to build". The thesis research is guided by the following research questions:

1. Are the German environmental movement and Friends of the Earth Germany, in particular, suitable candidates for establishing a post-growth economy?
2. What stops Friends of the Earth Germany from adopting a strategy for a post-growth economy?
3. How can the idea of a post-growth economy be operationalized for Friends of the Earth Germany?
4. If post-growth was operationalized, which causal mechanisms could be activated by the environmental movement to proceed towards a post-growth economy?

Operationalizing Post-Growth

In a nutshell, this thesis explores the opportunities and constraints for the adoption of a post-growth economy as a plausible approach towards sustainability by social movements. With the transdisciplinary perspective of sustainability science, the qualitative study of social movements and post-growth found that Germany does not have a post-growth movement. Nevertheless, the environmental movement and, in particular, Friends of the Earth Germany are in deed suitable candidates of change for post-growth. However, they have not adopted post-growth yet because of certain gaps in bridging concepts of post-growth with their own work. To fill this gap, the study recommends to operationalize post-growth in "five steps: (1) to distinguish between 'sustainable liberalism' and 'fair de-growth' as two major types of post-growth, (2) to re-frame the promises of economic growth as myths, (3) to complement 'political choice' as means towards post-growth with 'social choice', (4) to identify and compile areas of a post-growth economy, and (5) to overcome the inherent power dilemma between agents of change and actors of

¹ Regarding the scope of this thesis, I focus on the implications of a post-growth economy, although I recognize that only a post-growth society gives a full picture of an entirely sustainable scenario (Seidl/Zahrnt 2010).

these areas, that are required to be transformed, while forming coalitions between both. If these recommendations are taken into account by academics and activists, the environmental movement is more likely to successfully activate causal mechanisms of change for the transition to a post-growth economy. With its critique on the current comprehension of progress as economic growth, post-growth is initiating a new, more fruitful phase of the sustainability discourse.

Sustainability science approach

Localising this research project to the field of sustainability sciences, it aims to understand the added value of a transdisciplinary approach. Through the analysis of complexity, uncertainty and persistence, sustainability scientists have put one major question on their research agenda: “how to improve human well-being in ways that account for the ultimate dependence of that well-being on the natural environment?” (Clark 2009, 6) This thesis follows the idea of strong sustainability (Ott/Döring 2004, 43), which considers the ecological boundaries as the major limiting factor for other systems. This idea is conceptualized in the ecological economics model visualizing an hierarchically structure of the ecological system, the social system and the economic system where the former sets the limitations for the latter. This is an ideal and normative model (Ott/Döring 2004, 42), which runs counter with the current priorities of these systems and opposes the three-pillar-model of sustainability (Enquete-Kommission 1998, 32 as cited in Ott/Döring 2004, 37), which does not include a prioritization and separates the three systems from each other. My thesis opposes the concept of weak sustainability and the idea of substituting different forms of capital (Solow 1993).

Besides producing knowledge, sustainability science has been concerned with turning the knowledge into action from the beginning. Thus, this research project applies an interdisciplinary approach since it studies social movements and post-growth. But it goes beyond that and applies a transdisciplinary approach, that follows Max-Neef's comprehension of transdisciplinarity (2005, 15) as “more than a new discipline or super-discipline (...), actually, a different manner of seeing the world, more systemic and more holistic.” It is based on a societal, real-world problem and transforms disciplinary knowledge in order to approach this problem. It is not just another word for applied science since transdisciplinarity approaches to contribute to societal change. It avoids a unification of language and methods, which would face the danger of applying for example methods of biology to a societal problem. Furthermore, transdisciplinarity avoids the creation of a new discipline, but communicates among disciplines and between science and practice aiming for more than the sum of both. However, transdisciplinary research “is still in the making, thus representing an unfinished scientific programme” (ibid., 5). The theory-driven question of ‘what is to be sustained?’ gains deep relevance, if it is intrinsically tied to the action-oriented question of ‘how to get there?’. The metaphor of a bridge illustrates the multi-dimensional challenges a sustainability scientists confronted with. First, the ability to bridge different types of communication is necessary, where agents lack a shared language. Second, bridging different norms, values and structures is required to avoid conflicts in goal formulation. Finally, a sustainability scientist's role to bridge theoretical and methodological spectra contributes to the connectivity of the results. In this thesis, the languages, values and structures of academics and activists have to be connected with each other. Further, bridging methodological and theoretical spectra is relevant to this thesis as well, in which political sciences, i.e. social movement studies, are combined with economics, environmental studies and social sciences.

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