Pluriversal learning: pathways toward a world of many worlds

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Abstract: In varied contexts around the world, groups and communities forging different kinds of futures are challenging the universal desirability of development toward ever-greater production, consumption, and ecological footprints. This article is about learning from some of those pathways in order to broaden horizons for conversations about degrowth beyond Europe where they first gained traction. It reviews empirical research on wide-ranging phenomena, and documents processes of mutual learning among researchers from varied cultural, linguistic, and national backgrounds. Affirmative political ecology is appraised as a framework for analyzing relations among differently shaped phenomena operating in different contexts and on various scales, and for supporting life-affirming efforts to co-construct worlds that might be healthier and happier for more people and other nature. Pluriverse is explored as an epistemological stance and a dialogic method to enhance appreciation of multiple ways of knowing and being in the world, and to foster enquiry that decenters models of science and development that have been portrayed as universally true and good. After conceptualizing key ideas and reflecting on learning processes and challenges among a network of 40 collaborators, the text turns to some movements that I have engaged in Latin America in search of insights to support ongoing development of thought and practice with degrowth.

Keywords: agroecology, buen vivir, degrowth, Latin America, mutual learning, pluriverse

Introduction

Amid 21st century searches for fairer and more sustainable futures, the term degrowth in English, *decrecimiento* in Spanish, *descrecita* in Italian, and *postwachstum* in German have sparked debates in political parties and national elections, and activated a range of local initiatives (Burkhart *et al.* 2017; D'Alisa, Demaria & Kallis 2014; Schmelzer *et al.*, in press). Concern with degrowth has

also exploded in academic research and debate, headlining dozens of books and hundreds of articles in multiple languages (reviewed in Demaria *et al.* 2018; Kallis *et al.* 2018; Weiss & Cattaneo 2017). Degrowth ideas and movements respond to global socio-ecological challenges with proposals that have global implications. Yet, at least in the realm of scholarly literature, I agree with Dengler and Seebacher (2019, 248) that "*degrowth is framed by researchers from the*

Global North as a proposal for the Global North and it has gained momentum first and foremost in the European context."

At the same time, in varied contexts around the world, groups and communities forging different kinds of futures are challenging the presumption that high-GDP western-style development is a superior model to be followed by all societies. This article reports on efforts to learn from some of those struggles in order to broaden horizons for considerations and conversations associated with degrowth.

Over the past century, policies and investments in countries across the world have increasingly pushed toward two purposes: promoting economic growth and extending modern/western institutions. The globalization of this distinctive path toward historical change has led to contradictory results: an astonishing acceleration in the production of certain types of commodities and technologies, intertwined with uneven degradation of socio-environmental systems (Seitzinger *et al.* 2015; Royal Society 2012). Damages associated with biodiversity loss, climate change, desertification, deforestation, erosion, migration, and related crises, together with the unequal distribution of associated burdens, have raised doubts about the direction of contemporary societies. To date, however, extensive scientific evidence of the negative consequences of expanding social metabolisms has not been sufficient to curb the drive for growth: the amount of matter and energy used by human economies continues to increase, while governments and businesses continue to prioritize and to promise expansion of production, consumption, and profit (IPCC

2018). How then, can researchers support societies to change course?

Escobar (2015, 454) observes that "*There is likely no other social and policy domain where the paradigm of growth has been most persistently deployed than that of 'development',*" a project for historical change whose application in the socio-cultural and economic production of the Third World has been widely critiqued (e.g., Rist 2002; Sachs 1988). This article extends those concerns to address ways that growth-driven development has also shaped and continues to constrain imaginaries in and of the so-called "first world."

Whereas policies and programs promoting sustainable development and green economies have largely responded to mounting crises by doubling down on efforts to accelerate economic growth and extend modern/western institutions, the work discussed here promotes rethinking of fundamental goals of development. Possibilities and resources for this mission are emerging on multiple fronts and scales. The United Nations (UN) move to design 2015-2030 Sustainable Development Goals to promote and measure changes in all countries opened opportunities to respond to global problems by targeting not only poverty, but also affluence and its environmental impacts (although UN's persistent emphasis on economic growth has so far constrained realization of these possibilities). Pope Francis' (2015) encyclical is more direct: "*Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming*" (Chapter 1, paragraph 23) and "*Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of*

ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention" (Chapter 5, paragraph 190).

This article traces efforts to shift priority from critiquing a universalizing development model toward practicing change in one's own position and supporting synergy among tangible pathways studied in contexts around the world. The section on theoretical currents explores how that shift is guided by affirmative political ecology (which directs research toward more life-affirming processes and purposes, while acknowledging needs for and limits of critical analyses), and how it is advanced via pluriversal dialogue (supporting appreciation of multiple ways of knowing and being in the world). Possibilities are explored for interaction among decolonial and degrowth perspectives to liberate diversely positioned thinkers and actors from some dominant assumptions.

Over the past five years, my journey toward affirmative political ecology has taken direction in dialogue with some 40 individuals who are also learning from struggles to maintain traditions or to forge new worlds that prioritize equitable wellbeing and socio-ecological vitality, rather than accumulation and expansion. Phenomena that collaborators have been studying (and engaging with in other ways, sometimes in their own homes) range from neo-monasticism among environmentally-oriented Christians in the United States (Cox Hall 2017), to decolonial applications of ubuntu philosophies foregrounding a position of "I am because we are" in the WoMin movement in South Africa (Vasna Ramasar), and long-evolving movements for ecological swaraj and radical ecological democracy in India (Kothari 2014).

While living and working in Europe from 2010 through 2014, I observed and participated in explorations of degrowth in academic courses, conferences, and publications, as well as social movements. In the United States, then, I was surprised to find so little familiarity with the term (and later, in 2018, happy to join others in a new group called DegrowUS). An electronic search of archived programs found no evidence of any titles or abstracts using the term "degrowth" at prior meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) (annual gatherings in which over 6,000 people exchange ideas in some 750 sessions). For the 2015 meetings, then, Lisa Gezon and I invited contributors to join a panel on Degrowth, Culture, and Power, posting calls with the following text on political ecology listservs:

"Recognizing that climate change, ocean acidification, desertification, and other undesired changes result from expansion of the quantity of matter and energy transformed in human economic production, we seek to bring together research that broadens horizons for imagining alternative paths forward. The proposed panel brings a human face to ecological economics and political ecology via ethnographic explorations of diverse socionatural worlds through which human populations are consciously trying to forge ecologically sound and socially rewarding futures, rather than to expand resource use for economic gain."

An unexpected wealth of responses from anthropologists in half a dozen countries, and from non-anthropologists, including economist Juliet Schor,

geographer Dianne Rocheleau, and political scientist Robin LeBlanc, led to an invited double session with 14 contributors and an unusually large and active audience.[1] Additional collaborators were drawn into further gatherings that I organized, some in partnership with Gezon: a third sessions of the American Anthropological Association (2016), two sessions at the 5th International Degrowth Conference in Budapest (2016), a workshop at the University of Hamburg (2017), and two 2018 events at the University of Florida: a workshop sponsored by the Wenner Gren Foundation and an international conference on "Buen Vivir and other Pathways to Post-Development."[2]

This article's section on collaborative processes and challenges describes efforts to learn across studies carried out in dissimilar contexts on six continents. It also reflects on dialogue among participants' wide-ranging cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and their varied training in anthropology, architecture, geography, economy, human ecology, political science, sociology, and sustainability studies. Collaborators have not been not defined by institutional membership or an official name; here I refer to us as a network, in Merriam-Webster's sense of: "*a usually informally interconnected group or association of persons (such as friends or professional colleagues),*" and draw from our conversations and writing to form the provisional label "degrowth/culture/power network."

This project responds to calls for greater dialogue among paths toward change, and also to concerns about barriers and tensions that frustrate such dialogue (Beling *et al.* 2017; Dengler & Seebacher 2019; Escobar

2015; Kothari *et al.* 2014; Rodríguez-Labajos *et al.* 2019). In his review of a panorama of political imaginaries expressed in transition discourses, Escobar (2015, 451) identifies points of convergence between degrowth in the north and postdevelopment in Latin America:

"[W]hereas they originate in somewhat different intellectual traditions and operate through different epistemic and political practices, they share closely connected imaginaries, goals, and predicaments, chiefly, a radical questioning of the core assumption of growth and economism, a vision of alternative worlds based on ecological integrity and social justice, and the ever present risk of cooptation." Escobar (2015, 451)

Escobar (2015, 451) also highlights tensions and disconnects that have hindered such conversations: "*Succinctly stated, those engaged in transition activism and theorizing in the North rarely delve into those from the South; conversely, those in the South tend to dismiss too easily northern proposals or to consider them inapplicable to their contexts.*" To promote deeper efforts to bring these two sets of discourses into mutually enriching dialogue, Escobar proposes adopting a pluriversal perspective.

Arguing that "*'Green Economy' is not an adequate response to the unsustainability and inequity created by 'development'*" Demaria *et al.* (2014, 362) explore connections among buen vivir, ecological swaraj, and degrowth as radical alternatives for human-environmental well-being. Without trying to consolidate these currents into a single vision or framework, the authors identify shared values and principles:

"bio-ethics or respect for all life and the rights of (and stewardship towards) nonhuman nature; holistic human well-being that puts non-material (including spiritual) and material aspects on the same footing; equity and justice; diversity and pluralism; governance based on subsidiarity and direct participation; collective work, solidarity and reciprocity while respecting the individual; responsibility; ecological integrity and resilience; simplicity (or the ethic of 'enoughness' and sufficiency – aparigraha in the Indian context); dignity of work; and qualitative pursuit of happiness." (Demaria et al. 2014, 370)

Recent publications point to frustrations in efforts to advance dialogue across difference. In "Not So Natural an Alliance? Degrowth and Environmental Justice Movements in the Global South" Rodríguez-Labajos *et al.* (2019, 176) analyze interviews with activists in a range of environmental justice movements, finding that "*In parts of Africa, Latin America and many other regions of the Global South, including poor and marginalised communities in Northern countries, the term degrowth is not appealing, and does not match people's demands*" (Rodríguez-Labajosa 2019, 177). More affirmatively, the authors illuminate possibilities to enhance connectivity by addressing key disconnects around concepts of time, individualism, and anthropocentrism.

In "What About the Global South? Towards a Feminist Decolonial Degrowth Approach" Dengler and Seebacher (2019, 247) ask "*How does degrowth need to be pursued to promote intragenerational socio-ecological justice without falling into the trap of reproducing (neo) colonial continuities?*" Finding promising pathways to follow in degrowth's "concrete

utopia," the authors argue that global dimensions of degrowth transformations proposed in and for the Global North have not been sufficiently considered. There is hope in Dengler and Seebacher's (2019, 247) assessment that more meaningful considerations are possible, if "*degrowth is not to be misunderstood as proposal from the Global North imposed on the Global South, but rather a Northern supplement to Southern concepts, movements and lines of thought. It is therefore imperative for degrowth to seek alliances with these Southern 'fellow travelers.'*"

Following the present introduction, the first section of this article introduces guiding theoretical currents. The second section reflects on processes and challenges among collaborators working to apply these ideas in empirical studies and analyses. The third section characterizes pathways that I have been learning from in Latin America— Zapatista, buen vivir, and agroecology— and considers insights they may offer for enhancing broader conversations around the degrowth initiatives in which I have been engaged in Europe and the United States. Various passages in this article draw on ideas and words from other pieces I have written (Paulson 2014, 2017, forthcoming). The conclusion urges mobilization of affirmative political ecology and pluriversal dialogue to enhance synergy among paths developed in different contexts and operating on multiple scales.

Theoretical currents

This section presents affirmative political ecology as a frame to guide investigations and analyses, and conceptualizes pluriverse,

decolonial, and degrowth perspectives with complementary potential to open new epistemological stances, and to loosen the hold of dominant positions.

Affirmative Political Ecology

Lisa Gezon and I have long collaborated to explore political ecology in practice, teaching, and writing (e.g., 2003, 2004). After decades of work among populations who have enjoyed relatively few benefits and borne relatively heavy burdens of modern development (Gezon in Madagascar and I in Bolivia), we were both disheartened by the power of political economic and cultural processes that we perceived as harmful to valuable socio-ecosystems, and we were both feeling impotent in our efforts to critique and change those processes. In 2014 we committed to shift energies toward appreciative enquiry and learning about aspects of socio-ecosystems that we valued, and set out to connect with others on similar paths.

By reaching out through political ecology listservs (Political Ecology Society, PESO, International Political Ecology Collaboratory, IPEK, and Political Ecology Network, POLLEN) we connected with people who study how various forms of power work in and through the production, reproduction, and adaptation of landscapes, lifeways, and socio-ecosystems. Those who joined in collaboration shared political ecology's commitment to work toward more equitable distribution of ecological and economic resources, risks, and visions. To varying degrees, we also shared political

ecology's tendency to pursue that objective mainly through critical analyses that challenge dominant interpretations of the causes of socio-environmental problems, and through contestation of prevalent technical-managerial responses.

Although many of us had been experimenting with what I now understand as affirmative political ecology, I do not remember anyone using the term when we began communicating in 2014. This article traces our moves to develop affirmative approaches via attention to ontological processes through which a multiplicity of socio-ecological worlds are created and recreated, and through application of multiscale analytic tools for the difficult work of linking together appreciated local phenomena—such as traditions of equitable exchange, experiments in voluntary simplicity, or community timebanks—with phenomena operating on different scales such as socio-political institutions, global markets, media messages, national economies, ecosystems, and earth systems.

Pluriverse

The pluriverse has been conceptualized as a rainbow of cosmologies, knowledges, and vital worlds (Escobar 2018; Mignolo 2013). These are not envisaged as distinct cultures or sciences, each with its independent logic, but as multiple ways of being and knowing that have co-evolved in relations of power and difference and continue to do so. Many worlds that coexist today manifest historical influences of colonialism, capitalism, and associated sciences and institutions, while they simultaneously exercise visions,

desires, and practices that move on different wavelengths.

In *Epistemologies of the South. Justice against Epistemicide*, de Sousa (2014) argues that the empowerment of these different wavelengths, together with the communities of knowledge who embody and (re)produce them, are indispensable for the long-term sustainability of people and the planet. Just as biodiversity enhances the resilience of ecosystems in the face of changing conditions, so too cultural, linguistic, technological, and cosmological diversity enhance the resilience of socio-ecosystems. Globalization of one approach to human-environment relations sets the scene for disaster when that approach reaches (or breaches) limits and, along the way, closes possibilities to respond by mobilizing other kinds of approaches. In the words of Demaria *et al.* (2014, 273) "*Indigenous peoples, local communities, civil society and other actors of change need to continue dreaming, practicing, and promoting these alternatives, for one day there will be an overwhelming demand for them, and it will be tragic if we would have meanwhile abandoned them because we thought they were an impossibility.*" With conviction that transition to healthier and more sustainable worlds cannot follow a single development model or universal scientific paradigm, we look to pluriverse for ways of learning that support a heterogeneously thriving world.

Decolonial perspectives and initiatives

Postcolonial critiques call attention to historical processes that contribute to current socio-ecological crises, including the global expansion of certain political economic and sociocultural systems, together with their representation as universally good (Fanon 2007; Lang & Mokrani 2013). Like Dengler and Seebacher (2019, 247), my understanding of decolonial visions and ventures is guided by Argentinean feminist Maria Lugones (2010: 747) "*as opportunity to go beyond the (post-colonial) analysis of racialized, capitalist and gendered structural in-justices, i.e. the coloniality of the status quo and to foster decoloniality in theory and practice.*" Especially relevant for affirmative political ecologies are ways in which decolonial initiatives intertwine struggles against political-cultural domination and economic expansion with positive alternatives, seen in Mahatma Gandhi's message to "*Live simply so that others can simply live*", Yasuni's cry "*Leave the oil in the soil*", and Via Campesina's goal of food sovereignty.

In *Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South*, Escobar (2015b; 2016) illustrates the depth and potential of other ways through examples of indigenous reactions against expansion of mining in Colombia, acts of resistance that not only involve physical, but also ontological, occupation of territories. Escobar argues that "*Epistemologies of the South might also be useful to those who have been at the receiving end of those colonialist categories that have transmogrified their experiences, translated them into lacks, or simply rendered them utterly illegible and invisible*" (Escobar 2015b, 13).

Here I ask a complementary question: How might epistemologies of the South be useful to actors identified as colonizers, to those who have been seduced into promoting or being complicit with modes of development that have turned out to be

ethnocentric, ethnocidal, and ecocidal? As Latouche (2009, 11) emphasizes, societies whose political-economic domination has led to global dissemination of their supposedly superior languages and cultures have suffered, in the process, a paralyzing colonization of their own imaginaries. Decolonial perspectives might interact with those of degrowth to loosen the hold of visions that have become globally dominant, and that in different ways influence and constrain thinkers and actors who are differently positioned in that dominance. This type of synergy was activated by philosopher and priest Ivan Illich (1971 and 1973), whose questioning of the assumed benefits of spreading western culture in Latin America through formal education, economic development, western medicine, and paid work provoked critical discussion around European lifeways and fueled initiatives of descroissance.

Degrowth

Amid healthy theoretical and normative debates about what degrowth is, and what forms it should take, participants in our network have found common ground on three points. First, ideas of degrowth provoke us to ask how imperatives and mechanisms of growth have influenced specific political ecologies. Second, ideals of degrowth call us to shift our productivist ambitions and consumerist identities toward visions of good life characterized by health, harmony, pleasure, conviviality and vitality among humans and ecosystems. Third, we live degrowth as a multiform movement that appreciates lifeways motivated by desires

for equitable well-being and supports them to survive and thrive in the interstices of contemporary growth societies. Multiple roots and expressions of degrowth are discussed extensively elsewhere (e.g., Kallis 2018).

The question driving this article is how to enrich degrowth trajectories in ways that enhance considerations of and conversations with actors and actions outside of Europe. As ecological economists broaden the scope for assessing the ever-growing use of resources through analyses of unequal exchanges that interconnect ecosystems and lifeways across distant spaces (eg, Hornborg & Martinez-Alier 2016; Schor 2005), we face the challenge of seeking meaningful connections among experiences of culture, knowledge, and power differently positioned along those value chains.

The most tangible strategy employed by our network is to identify and make visible forms of engagement with degrowth across the globe. World scientists agree on the need to halt material growth (the amount of matter and energy transformed by the metabolism of human society) in order to mitigate climate change, acidification of the oceans, biodiversity loss, fresh water depletion, and other crises (IPCC 2018; Global Footprint Network 2014; Royal Society 2012; Steffen *et al.* 2015; Wackernagel & Rees 1996). We raise attention to other calls to curb global metabolism, arising from actors such as those described by Eric Hirsch (2017), struggling to adapt lives turned upside down amid melting glaciers in Peru and rising sea levels in the Maldives. Billions more affected by deforestation, erosion,

drying up of rivers and springs, pollution of air and water, fires, and depletion of wildlife are raising questions. In the face of longstanding official tendencies to attribute these phenomena to proximal causes (such as inadequate local practices and education, defective markets, corruption, or weak governance), a growing range of actors look for causes in increased global ecological footprints, and demand solutions that reduce such footprints.

Participants in the degrowth/culture/ power network produced a special section of the *Journal of Political Ecology* (Gezon & Paulson 2017) that explores degrowth in countries that seem to have missed the growth boom altogether (Madagascar, Bhutan), in contexts where development has run into trouble (Perú), as well as in countries that boast prodigious economic and material growth (Faroe Islands, Finland, Germany, New Zealand). Some of the studies consider low-consumption people and places within powerful national economies (Atlantic Canada; Bahia, Brazil; Chiapas, Mexico; and Missouri and North Carolina, United States). The publication also calls attention to unplanned circumstances, when reductions in production and consumption are not necessarily chosen or welcomed by participants, yet communities or societies respond affirmatively, with a commitment to construct low-impact livelihoods that prioritize well-being and equity. In Japan and Italy, for example, where years of economic stagnation have provoked some visions of urban planning that do not depend on or strive for growth, Robin LeBlanc (2017) researches architectural innovations designed to facilitate experiences of "beautifully poor" community and creativity.

A fundamental strategy is openness to heterogenous ways in which the goal of net degrowth may play out. Negative reactions in the north and south are associated with common interpretations of degrowth as a mandate that every household and every community in the world reduce consumption and resource use. This kind of reaction is understandable given the omnipresence of messages mandating that growth (in income, consumption, GDP) should happen everywhere always, from the lowest to the highest income households and countries.

An alternative is to locate material degrowth on a larger scale, such as global ecological footprint, a goal toward which different socio-ecologies play different roles. Instead of calling for sustained growth overall, as do UN Sustainable Development Goals, the *People and the planet report*, produced by a global coalition of 23 scientists under the auspices of the Royal Society (2012), distinguishes needs for increased consumption in some parts of an uneven planet from needs for degrowth in others. Key recommendations for the international community start with (1) bringing the 1.3 billion people living on less than $1.25 per day out of absolute poverty and reducing the inequality that persists in the world today, (2) stabilizing and then reducing material consumption in the wealthiest and emerging economies, and (3) increasing political leadership and financial commitment for reproductive health and voluntary family planning programs.

Degrowth scholars do not share a common position on economic implications of degrowth in low-income countries and communities.

"Some degrowth proponents arguing for a dematerialization strategy in the Global North do so by suggesting this would enable countries of the Global South to grow (e.g. Martínez-Alier, 2012: 66). The more common approach in the degrowth discourse is that degrowth in the Global North is "liberat[ing] conceptual space for countries there to find their own trajectories of what they define as the good life" (Kallis et al. 2015: 5)." (Dengler & Seebacher 2019, 248)

Escobar (2015, 456) warns against "*falling into the trap, from northern perspectives, of thinking that while the North needs to degrow, the South needs 'development'; conversely, from southern perspectives, it is important to avoid the idea that degrowth is "ok for the North" but that the South needs rapid growth, whether to catch up with rich countries, satisfy the needs of the poor, or reduce inequalities.*" Such approaches miss the basic degrowth vision: a world in which material and economic growth is subordinated to human and environmental wellbeing, not the other way around. They also miss the key understanding that modern development has been made possible by some groups exploiting the human and natural resources of others and outsourcing environmental damage to less powerful people and places (e.g., Hornborg *et al.* 2007; Walter & Martinez Alier 2012). The revolutionary realization that uneven distribution of wealth and power is, in itself, a fundamental cause of planetary environmental crises makes visible the relevance and urgency of degrowth for low-income communities and countries positioned at the raw end of value chains.

A final strategy is to continue to extend attention beyond GDP. Degrowth scholars have usefully critiqued the externalization of vital ecological and social dimensions from GDP calculus, and gathered extensive evidence that GDP growth to date has corresponded to greater environmental impact in terms of net consumption of resources and net production of waste, including emissions (Daly 1996; Isenhour 2016; Jackson 2009; Stern 2004; Sebri 2015). Much degrowth scholarship has engaged debates with green growth advocates about the possibility—or desirability—to continue pushing future growth in high-income countries while de-coupling it from environmental damage.

That important work needs to be complemented with different kinds of conversations that find greater resonance beyond economists, including attention to the degradation and regeneration of ecological and sociocultural wealth, and the non-commodified human activities that are so vital among cases studied, including commons management, reciprocal, and reproductive labor. At the same time, proposals for new economic policies need to be complemented with different kinds of practices, opening horizons for what Escobar (2015, 453) characterizes as the most imaginative transition discourses, those which *"link together aspects that have remained separate in previous imaginings of social transformation: ontological, cultural, politico-economic, ecological, and spiritual."*

In contrast to broad consensus around material degrowth, much less enthusiasm has been generated around calls to curb economic growth, whose beneficial character is the bedrock of right and left-leaning politics throughout the world (e.g. on Bolivia, Kohl & Farthing

2012). Degrowth conversations can be extended to new realms by complementing important debates on market growth and recession with exploration of opportunities for disengaging societies from growth-obsession so that they can promote policies and practices that directly support wellbeing in terms chosen by each population (explored by Latouche 2009; Van de Berg & Kallis 2012; Van de Berg 2011). The remarkable example of Bhutan's decades-long efforts to prioritize happiness among citizens in harmony with Buddhist spiritual values is illuminated by Verma's (2017) examination of the measures that constitute the Gross National Happiness Index: health, education, standards of living, uses of time, good governance, ecological diversity and resilience, psychological well-being, community vitality, diversity and cultural resilience.

Collaborative processes and challenges

The pioneering volume *Degrowth: Vocabulary for a new era* (D'Alisa, Demaria & Kallis 2014) has provoked and nourished thought and action among hundreds of people involved in writing, reviewing, editing, translating, learning, and teaching with the collection. My own involvement in all these aspects motivated me to apply the book's largely theoretical elements to investigations of empirical phenomena, and to extend conversations beyond the book's largely Europe-based contributors to a wider range of interlocutors. To work toward these purposes in each conference, workshop, and writing project, Gezon

and I took steps to encourage focus on case studies around the world, to support political ecology analyses, and to pursue affirmative purposes. Along the way, some collaborators have launched complementary initiatives that take different shapes. This section outlines steps employed to facilitate the process, and reflects on some of the challenges faced.

A first step has been to design calls and guidelines that invite participants to observe and report empirical evidence, in the sense of what researchers and their interlocutors see, hear, feel, touch, and taste in the cases and contexts studied. All participants expressed and exercised serious commitment to documenting tangible aspects of studied phenomena, yet in presentations and writing we struggled with tendencies to foreground abstract analyses of institutions (e.g., capitalism, patriarchy, modern science), and to quote or criticize prominent theorists. In one instance, for example, upon compiling the table of contents for our collection of case studies, we were astonished to discover that half of the titles failed to indicate any people, places, or phenomena studied. Instead, authors had chosen to present their studies with abstract titles such as "The ontological politics of degrowth," and "Building non-hegemonic socio-ecologies." Why does disembodied and decontextualized theoretical discourse feel more attractive and powerful than words and practices of local actors? What may be implications of shifting greater priority to the latter?

A second step has been to build political ecology frameworks supporting participants to foreground attention to power and difference among the visions and

practices that (re)produce varied political ecologies, and to seek relations among factors and forces operating at multiple spatial and temporal scales. We tried to make this political ecology affirmative by encouraging each other to identify positive aspects and potentials for constructive ways forward, even amid dynamics we judged as exploitative and degrading. The struggle to so is exemplified in a collaboration among three network participants who had all carried out extensive mixed methods studies over years of participating with very low-income communities living in fragile ecosystems in Latin America. Working together through many drafts of collaborative writing, Devore, Hirsch and Paulson (forthcoming) developed an analysis that identifies among these communities valuable forms of convivial conservation.

A third step involves choreography of conference and workshop interactions. None of our sessions was organized as a series of monologic presentations; instead, each experimented with interactive dynamics designed to build on written papers exchanged in anticipation of live conversation. In spite of apparent (and I think sincere) consensus on dialogic formats, it was difficult for many of us to let go of conventional modes of scholarly performance, such as launching into solo lectures that exceed allotted time, monopolizing discussion time, and completing written presentations at the last minute, precluding opportunities to share with co-panelists.

One fruitful experiment at the UF conference began with two half-hour talks by Arturo Escobar and Alberto Acosta communicating ideas of pluriverse, followed by an effort to experience and to model pluriversal conversation. Ten presenters, from nearly as many countries and languages of origin, each made a three-minute lightning presentation communicating a vital message and a few images from one case study. We then engaged audience members and speakers in a 45-minute conversation. The positive feeling of being part of a creative conversation across differences was exhilarating. However, feelings of spontaneous interconnection belied extensive planning. Before the conference began, a full dress rehearsal was held with the ten lightning talks and facilitators trained to watch times and to avoid soliciting questions for the speakers— instead they learned to invite audience members to contribute their own ideas to the conversation.

How to appreciate unremarked people, places, practices, and more horizontal learning processes?

It has not been easy to shift energy away from critical analysis and abstract theory. On numerous occasions, early drafts prepared by network participants developed long sophisticated critiques of degrading influences of dominant systems on specific socioecological worlds, leaving little space to glimpse the valued worlds and possibilities actually studied. An article by Burke and Shear (2014) that circulated through our network provoked fruitful discussion about the argument that, in times of socioecological crises, it

is insufficient for intellectuals to critique problematic structures; they must also write about heterodox practices and systems, help to develop and disseminate visions supporting them, and engage actively in co-constructing alternatives.

With time, various network participants wrote thoughtfully about such endeavors: Emma McGuirk (2017) on participatory action research among timebank participants in New Zealand; Jonathan Lockyer (2017) on a multi-year research project gradually co-created with residents of Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage to assess and enhance progress toward their own goals; Ulrich Demmer on translating ideas among a Transition Town in Heidelberg, university classes in Munich, and an eco-community in Barcelona (Demmer & Hummel 2017); and Agata Hummel on weaving together diverse actors and initiatives in an internet platform and varied live encounters (Demmer & Hummel 2017). In serving as conduits that connect different conversations, these and other researchers are learning about—and also consciously contributing to—efforts to construct various kinds of anti-hierarchical, self-organized, and ethical social organisms. These efforts join a wave of activist-research that Dianne Rocheleau (2007: 723) characterizes as a *"way to harness practical political ecology, and to demonstrate that many other worlds are possible and practical."*

We continue to struggle with embodiment and expectations of expert knowledge, together with high value on polysyllabic theoretical discourse. And look to other traditions to continue learning ways of valuing the tangible and mundane, practicing less hierarchical ways

of learning and teaching, and supporting dialogue between scientific expertise and understandings generated through other forms of experience and practice.

How to think comparatively from and about different initiatives and lifeworlds?

We purposefully set out to think about degrowth across cultures and contexts, then found it difficult to build a comparative frame to interconnect the different shapes, locations, and purposes we found. Sometimes it seems the clearest commonality is in the negative: each phenomenon and community studied stands in contrast to dominant pro-growth systems. Which tempts us to refer to these heterogeneous paths as "alternatives," and to plural knowledges as "ethnosciences," problematic language that reinforces the centrality of dominant modes.

Challenges also arose in communicating across differently privileged and differently marginalized positions of our network and with interlocutors in case studies. A small lesson materialized in the UF workshop when European and US participants had trouble pronouncing the name of Chinese participant Jixia Lu. When someone suggestion a nickname, an African participant pointed out problematic power dynamics in the colonial legacy of Europeans renaming other people and places. This front may be addressed by responding to Escobar's (2016, p.13) invitation to explore epistemologies of the south to find theories and tools "for all those of us who no longer want to be complicit

with the silencing of popular knowledges and experiences by Eurocentric knowledge, sometimes performed even in the name of allegedly critical and progressive theory."

How to work in and out of academic, grass-roots, and government realms?

Giorgos Kallis (2018, 8) explains how degrowth evolved on two fronts that partly reflect a geographical and cultural split. One approach, advanced largely by economists from Europe and North America (in my own observation, mostly men), uses economic reasoning to point out limits and costs of growth, expressed through models that speak to concerns of wealthy capitalist societies. More radical approaches question the primacy of economic reasoning altogether, expressing southern perspectives, *"critical of colonial relations of dependence and exploitation, revaluing alternative cosmovisions that challenge Western ideas of improvement and scales of progress that imagine the Western way of living to be the best"* (Kallis 2018, 8). Early political ecology also gained traction by using scholarly methods and languages in new ways to criticize dominant political economic-ecological systems; those approaches have coexisted and evolved in fertile tension with feminist, decolonial and other approaches. The work of affirmative political ecology will also require building and traveling along bridges that connect mainstream science to other ways of knowing, being, and communicating.

Although learning with and from people operating outside of academia has been a central purpose of the degrowth/culture/

power network, our locus and practice has remained largely shaped by academia. The few participants in each of our gatherings and writing efforts who identify themselves as grass-roots activists or professionals in government and non-governmental organizations faced different financial and temporal barriers than academic participants, and engaged less fully overall. Whereas participants positioned in academia were enthusiastic about disseminating our work through scholarly journals, writing by people positioned outside of academia found less acceptance there.

With Robbins (2011: xix) I value and seek the interaction of scholarly research, activism, and professional practice in political ecology understood "*as an intellectual investigation of the human–environment interaction, and as a political exercise for greater social and ecological justice.*" Yet, across important differences in our network, including linguistic, cultural, geographic and disciplinary background, there is no doubt that similarities in education and worldviews facilitated certain kinds of connections among those of us positioned in academic institutional roles. How can we gain purchase in mainstream scholarly debates, yet also affirm and experiment with other ways of knowing and being that have been marginalized by the colonial matrices of power (Quijano, 2007)? How can we learn from both frustrating and fertile experiences to connect across these divides?

Opportunities to learn in dialogue with participants on Zapatista, buen vivir, and agroecology pathways

This final section identifies opportunities to illuminate the challenges raised above with insights from pathways in Latin America. I have been learning through interactions with several communities and initiatives in Latin America via mixed methods field research, participatory action research, and other forms of accompaniment, some ongoing over decades. Participation in dozens of workshops about human-environmental issues has been vital for my evolving understandings. An early example is a 1994 workshop in Puno, Peru 1994, organized by Consejo Andino de Manejo Ecológico with participants of PRATEC (Andean Project of Peasant Technologies) seeking agroecological alternatives to modern Western approaches to rural development through support of local knowledges, ritual agricultural practices, and worldviews less dominated by dualism and anthropocentrism. Recent experiences include the XII workshop on Medio Ambiente-Sociedad in Havana, Cuba, in 2018, and a workshop supported by Forest Trends in Chiapas, Mexico, in 2016 that allowed me to think and talk about territoriality with representatives from indigenous territories across the continent.

I've also learned from larger gatherings in spaces like the Zapatista Universidad de la Tierra in Chiapas and the First North-South Conference of Degrowth-Descrecimiento (2018) hosted by Descrecimiento México with the following objectives: (1) Bring together people and movements from both North and South that are critical of growth, development and modernity; (2) Deepen the reflection on the colonization of the social imaginary; (3) Open philosophical, psychological, anthropological and sociological debates about the destructive logic of Technoscience, Economics and the State: (4) Promote debates around Coloniality, the Patriarchate and the idea of Scarcity, and (5) Promote the creation of social networks of cooperation and international collaboration for the defense of the territory, the survival of communities and cultures.[3] Some sessions in this conference explored adaptation and resignification of ideas associated with degrowth by Vía Campesina, the World Peoples' Conferences on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, and other Latin Americans who see benefits in halting the expansion of economies that exploit and denigrate their bodies and territories. Here we focus on complementary questions about how Latin American pathways can enrich conceptualizations and conversations around degrowth.

Zapatista movement

Since the Zapatista uprising in 1994, on the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into force, residents of Chiapas have resisted an array of initiatives advancing material and economic growth. If the world was surprised to see this bold revolutionary front emerge from indigenous community and culture, it was even more stunned to learn that, instead of claiming a larger

share of national power and resources for development, Zapatistas sought autonomy to forge different futures.

Thinking from and across different languages, lifeworlds, and initiatives has been central to Zapatistas who, after a dozen years of experimentation and learning, launched *La Otra Campaña* (The Other Campaign) in 2006 with the purpose of building alliances among voices and visions "from below and to the left," including those expressed by farmers, fishers, environmentalists, factory workers, students, trade unionists, victims of natural disasters, activists for women's and LGBTQ rights, and others (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional 2005; Marcos 2006). Fruits of *La Otra Campaña* are evident in protests that erupted between 2009 and 2014 against a highway megaproject designed to expand agribusiness and ecotourism in Chiapas. Jon Otto (2017) describes co-participation in the resistance of differently positioned actors who perceive the highway as an environmental and social threat: Zapatista and non-Zapatista residents, indigenous and non-indigenous, academics, religious figures, and non-governmental organizations.

La Otra Campaña was designed to build a diverse and united front against capitalist and neoliberal expansion. Can its strategies be adapted to gather wider support against growth? What windows of opportunity are opened through these experiences of shared struggles from different positions?

Buen vivir

Lifeways that explicitly foreground community and ecological wellbeing have evolved over centuries among Andean cultures and cosmologies, associated with the Quichua term *sumak kawsay* and the Aymara *suma qamaña*. In recent decades these traditions have been articulated around the terms Buen Vivir and Vivir Bien, and adapted to contemporary conditions in dialogue with other currents including environmentalist and anticolonial critiques of capitalist development (Acosta 2014; Gudynas 2017). Albeit varying and contested, most interpretations of buen vivir have certain affinities. Buen vivir is not about accumulating material wealth, nor "getting ahead" of one's neighbors; it is about seeking harmonious interdependence among human neighbors and non-human nature. Buen vivir is not a universal model; its principles are expressed in plural ways grounded in specific contexts and perspectives. Finally, foundational cosmologies of buen vivir represent what Rodríguez-Labajosa *et al.* (2019, 179) identify as a key missing piece of degrowth to date: "*the non-anthropocentric/Nature's perspective that leads to an absolute transformation of the relationship between humans and their environments.*"

The past decade of experimentation in which buen vivir has been incorporated into (or appropriated by) a range of policies, programs, and even national constitutions has sparked passionate debates about how this lifeway should be named, defined, translated, institutionalized or expanded in today's world. Some argue against making any effort at all to extend buen vivir,

warning that scaling up inevitably leads to distortion and cooptation. Learning from those experiences of cooptation, some degrowth advocates extol the disagreeable taste of the term "degrowth," which certainly garners less popular appeal than "living well."

Vital lessons can be learned from the life of buen vivir as it moves through grassroots, academic, and political realms. Antonio Luis Hidalgo and Ana Patricia Cubillo (2014) classify perspectives mobilized by *sumak kawsay* into three general positions. First are statist interpretations manifest in national policies of Ecuador and Bolivia, which the authors interpret as Andean versions of socialism, with emphasis on state management (and exploitation) of resources to achieve the main objective of social equity. Whereas this first (and highest profile) perspective constitutes an alternative strategy toward economic development, the other two advance a paradigmatic alternative to development, thanks to their fundamental opposition to unlimited economic growth via exploitation of nature. The second perspective, called indigenista-pachamamista, focuses on *sumak kawsay* as the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples. And the third, an ecologist/ post-development perspective, embraces *sumak kawsay* as a contentious project built through the co-participation of groups struggling against capitalist extractivism and socio-ecological degradation. Of course there is debate about which is the right or the real expression of buen vivir. And also valuable insights for transcending such debates.

Recognizing that *sumak kawsay*—like feminism—is a polysemic concept, Silvia

Vega Ugalde (2014) appreciates the potential in this multiplicity. Disapproval of the sociopolitical system in which we live–including capitalist expansion and patriarchy as constitutive and inseparable parts of that system–differs according to one's perspective and position. And so differ affirmative responses, even those drawing on and fueled by shared sources. Instead of debating the correct way to define one buen vivir or one feminism, Vega Ugalde offers the possibility of gathering dissimilar concepts and actions into dialogue that is difficult and fruitful.

The trajectory of degrowth, like that of buen vivir, is marked by contradictions between desires to consolidate one clear theory and competing commitments to support heterodox theory in constant interaction with heterogeneous practices. As proponents of degrowth struggle to make impacts within western sciences and political economies, and also to critique these and to strengthen other realms, we can learn from tensions among differing conceptualizations and practices of buen vivir that have been operating in institutional contexts ranging from community traditions to university courses and national legislation.

Agroecological revolution

National governments and international organizations have promoted agricultural development with objectives of maximizing the volume of products and the amount of money generated by each hectare of land, as well as expanding the area of land cultivated. Waves of agroindustrial expansion and

intensification have been promoted by expert scientists and extensionists. Yet countless families and communities are using different methods to maintain or to recreate agrosilvopastoral systems oriented to different objectives that are positive for them, including food sovereignty, resilience, self-knowledge, freedom from debt, nutrition, agrobiodiversity, and community. Some of these purposes and approaches have come together in agroecology work that intersects with Zapatista and buen vivir movements.

In contrast to the unidirectional transfer of expert western knowledge to local men that drove the green revolution, Latin America's agroecology revolution has been advanced through experimentation and mutual exchanges among men and women farmers from different communities, through the combination of ancient and innovative practices, and through dialogue between scientific and local knowledges. Farmers and organizations have gained strength and ability by engaging with others in movements such as Via Campesina and Campesino a Campesino. Both facilitate non-hierarchical learning through cultural and geographical visits and exchanges in which participants share, adapt, and transform their own knowledge in accordance with the parameters and priorities of their own contexts (Rosset *et al.* 2011).

Farmers on this pathway recognize that their methodological and epistemological choices are deeply political. In a book that narrates the origin and diffusion of the Campesino a Campesino movement over thirty years, Holt-Giménez (2008)

argues that the ability to access, adapt, create, use, and defend agroecological knowledge in its own terms is a political act, an exercise in autonomy. The very name of the organization foregrounds its modus operandi of horizontal learning among small farmers.

After decades of activism at interfaces between scientific and local learning, Altieri and Toledo (2011) celebrate a triple agroecological revolution (technical, epistemological and sociopolitical), which the authors see as working to restore local self-sufficiency, regenerate agrobiodiversity and biophysical landscapes, and produce healthy food with low inputs. Underlying this process are epistemologies and pedagogies that (re)generate diverse ways of understanding the world. Agroecology offers motivation and guidance for those who, like scholars in our degrowth/ culture/power network, face challenges in appreciating unremarked people, places, practices, and more horizontal learning processes.

Degrowth research can contribute important elements here. For example, more comprehensive production metrics developed to reveal and critique the externalization and outsourcing of socio-environmental costs of production can be adapted in affirmative ways to support the search for maximum nutritional value with minimum material and energy inputs and with minimum contamination and emissions (e.g., Hornborg *et al.* 2007; Walter & Martinez-Alier 2012). Methods developed by degrowth scholars can also be used to measure the contribution of agroecology to reducing amounts of

matter and energy (including fossil fuels and petrochemicals) transformed to feed a given population.

Long traditions of non-hierarchical mutual learning among differently positioned participants in agroecological movements offer promise for attempts at new kinds of learning in which western agronomists, environmental scientists, and degrowth scholars not only gather data from local farmers, but also open themselves to local knowledge processes.

Conclusion

Moves to decrease the quantity of material and energy transformed by human economies constitute a necessary, but not sufficient, response to current socio-ecological crises. A more radical cultural transformation is needed to generate (re) productive systems, politics, and human relations around a new set of values and visions. What cultural forms might promote positive and equitable moves toward degrowth? How can scholars facilitate "*the collective will to achieve not only a lower material metabolism, but a different social metabolism that supports conditions of possibility for lives worthy of being lived with joy by all and for all*" (Pérez Orozco 2015, 27)?

This article reflects on efforts, challenges, and possibilities for pursuing such questions via exploration of degrowth thinking and practice within and beyond Europe. The purpose is not to expand the degrowth project by imposing it on others, nor by evangelizing to others; rather, to broaden degrowth conversations by including a

wider horizon of practices, visions, and voices. Whereas the ecological and human exploitation necessary for current forms of economic expansion is distanced and hidden from privileged consumers and shareholders (preventing the majority from seeing the need for degrowth), some of those costs are painfully obvious to poor people living in vulnerable ecosystems. And some of the cultural and historical drivers of growth are seen in different ways by actors in different positions of coloniality and decolonial struggles. Learning from those positions can allow more creative thinking with degrowth.

Affirmative political ecology has guided analysis of findings from my own ongoing research in Latin America and studies by colleagues in other contexts, while experimentation with pluriversal thought and practice has strengthened my appreciation of profoundly different ways of knowing and being. A five-year journey of mutual learning has faced challenges that we are still addressing. Lessons learned from other pathways encourage greater synergy among ideas and practices that might—in different ways—support a radical shift in the path of current societies (away from growth and towards wellbeing), along with a shift in epistemological paradigm (away from one universal truth and towards the pluriverse).

Challenges addressed here go beyond learning new information from other places. They call us to reform dominant sciences and policies, whose responses to socio-environmental crises are still rooted in the universalist western-modern paradigms that led to this situation. Convinced that the

transition to more sustainable and equitable worlds cannot be driven by one grand theory or a single socio-ecological model, researchers in our network seek to learn through varied thoughts and experiences. This challenge begins with efforts to recognize other ways of understanding and (re)creating worlds. It also requires struggles for cognitive justice, a continuous project to make heterogeneous and emancipatory paths visible and legitimate in global society, in education, and in the production of knowledge. Thus we promote a transition toward pluriverse with the zapatista inspiration to create a world in which many worlds can thrive.

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Endnotes

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