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Why We Must Think of ‘Post-Growth’

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What is post-growth thinking and how is it different from the growth-centric thinking that is dominant today? A discussion of some principles of post-growth approaches to the economy, including of the focus that is required on livelihoods, energy security, and sustainable technologies.

It is 50 years since the publication of Limits to Growth (1972), a report that discussed the possibility of exponential economic and population growth with a finite supply of resources, was submitted to the Club of Rome. It revealed that economic growth was unsustainable and the limits to growth on this planet would be reached sometime within the next one hundred years or so. The consequence would be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.

But it also said that it was possible to alter current growth trends and establish a condition of ecological and economic stability that was sustainable far into the future. That desirable future demands that we design our economic activities to ensure a global equilibrium that satisfies the basic material needs of every person on earth and gives everyone an equal opportunity to realise his or her human potential (Meadows et al. 1972).

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Post-growth has emerged as a key choice we can make if we choose a sustainable, equitable, and just future and not a sudden collapse marked by untold human suffering and irreversible environmental transitions. Over the past couple of decades, post-growth thinking and action plans have been proposed as solutions to the climate crisis and multiple environmental, economic, and social challenges, such as extreme inequality and distress migration.

This essay explains what post-growth thinking is and how it is different from growth-centric thinking while it discusses some principles of post-growth approaches to the economy. It concludes by highlighting post-growth thinking in India and some illustrations of functioning post-growth societies.

What is Post-growth?

Post-growth is a political, social, and economic approach or orientation that searches for alternatives to the current global model of Western, growth-driven societies. It problematises economic growth and the modern fundamentals of private property, commodification processes, and material mass consumption (Gerber and Raina 2018). It questions the relative autonomy granted to the economy, which was a phenomenon that emerged from the institutional innovations that preceded the industrial revolution.

This autonomy was consolidated in the gross domestic product (GDP) and per capita GDP measures of economic growth when capital flows to several newly independent countries became important during the post-World War II years. In seeing economic growth as a social and political process, post-growth makes it imperative that there are changes in the prevalent social and political institutions or norms.

While welfare economics, social economics, and, more recently, behavioural and feminist economics have argued that well-being (both social and economic), care giving (non-paid economic activities), and the environmental costs of growth (accounted as externalities) have to be included and measured within the economy, post-growth demands a fundamental shift in our cognition, conceptualisation and measurement of the economy.

Replacing GDP growth with another measure(s) is not enough. Post-growth encompasses diverse conceptualisations and movements of post-GDP—agrowth, post-extractivism, steady-state economics, an alternative “good life”, and degrowth. Going beyond mere economic reorientation to inclusive or even green growth, post-growth entails a political, social-cultural, and psychological transformation of the growth-driven production and consumption systems patterned on developed industrial societies. It stems from a just, more egalitarian, and sustainable vision of society.

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By bringing together new structures and rules or changes in nature-human interactions, post-growth offers ways to transform growth-centric approaches. This involves the integration of select economic sectors such as agri-food, environment and forests, and health where sustainability transitions can happen. It demands the closure of some sectors or economic activities such as fossil fuel extraction and use, which are evidently harmful to nature and humanity. Other changes involve a carefully planned decline in the size of the economy to ensure that a steady state of throughput is achieved through a carefully negotiated balance between production and consumption, and redistribution of work and wealth.

By questioning the domination of the growth-centric framework in capitalist and communist economies, a new post-growth world seeks fundamental and radical moral and intellectual changes. As these herald changes in the state and in markets, and enable a revival of genuine welfare and prosperity that does not cause environmental harm and biodiversity loss, new social norms and institutions will govern our homes and work places. These norms or new ways of accounting for earnings, wages, expenditure and savings—and nature and magnitudes of investments—stem from the dominant class and its commitment to transformations, both economic and ethico-political.

Principles of Post growth Thinking

Since post-growth includes movements of degrowth, stabilisation, and the alternative flourishing of desirable sectors or segments of the society (Gerber and Raina 2018), its pathways are essentially democratic. The three post-growth principles discussed here help us make informed choices as to which sectors in the economy have to be promoted and which ones shut down, what kind of imbalances or unequal exchanges have to be arrested, and how certain unsustainable toxic relationships have to be reformed.

Sustainable interactions and relations: Since the economy is a sub-set of the social systems that have been shaped over millennia through interactions with nature, maintaining healthy and sustainable interactions between the economy, society, and nature is crucial in a post-growth world. Locally relevant and plausible sources of prosperity and well-being that build on sustainable interactions are important.

New structures that allow the integration or closure of select sectors begin with mapping the current throughput of the system, which will lead us to the desirable balance between production and consumption, and a socially and ecologically just distribution of work and wealth. This comes from acknowledging that matter, energy, and information are three pillars of all economic activity (Boulding 1966), and that the information or knowledge that society creates and controls plays a major role in how the economy accesses and uses matter and energy.

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Whether driving a truck, collecting forest produce, managing a corporate firm, making a car or ploughing a field, flows of matter, energy, and information are fundamental to all economic activities. A society that values well-being will reduce its use of matter and energy to ensure sustainable interactions and relations. For instance, Luxembourg, Chambly, and Perth are cities that have initiated free public transport, encouraging citizens to shun private cars and reduce fossil fuel emissions.

Policy changes with massive public investments and appropriate incentives have created organic agricultural production systems in countries such as Spain and Italy. Policies for and investments in free public transport and organic/sustainable agriculture are not declared part of a post-growth agenda. But they do create post-growth societies. People travelling together and accessing food through short value networks in local and regional markets bring back communities of sharing and ways of socialising that were gradually broken as Europe's industrial revolution progressed and migrant workers in urban settings lost their communities.

While the environmental gains are partially captured in emission reduction, chemical-free food, and nutritional and health outcomes in estimates of ecosystem services, post-growth consciously accounts for the increased positive social interactions, well-being and happiness. New forms of social and economic organisation, such as the Catalan Integral Cooperative, the Timbuktu Collective, and

movements and networks, like the La Via Campesina and the Slow Food Movement, enable these social outcomes.

Finally, this post-growth principle ensures that human labour and intelligence is applied to economic activities, reclaiming the work that was steadily displaced by fossil fuels, the induction motor and other machines operated by the concentrated energy we generate and store. Practices promoted include increasing work opportunities, redistributing labour (from current extractive/polluting industries), reducing working hours, assuring a minimum income for all workers, and consciously producing more durable goods with several repair and reuse options.

Meaningful, just and democratic localisation: Post-growth political ends and policy goals emerge from a fundamental questioning of what constitutes our economies and what we value in our social and economic systems. If our goals are a just and egalitarian world for all and sustainable social and ecological systems that are resilient to shocks, some new meanings are necessary. A fundamental caveat is that nature and (what we call) natural resources are not conceptualised and measured as natural capital.

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When the Dongria Kondh community confronts the nation state and its mining companies stating that the Niyamgiri hills are God and mother to them, they are not just stating their reverence or dependence on the ecosystem services provided by the hills. They are taking a value position of cognitive justice (Visvanathan 2009). In refusing consent to convert their God to a bauxite mine, they are also refusing to conceptualise the Niyamgiri hills as natural capital. Nature and all the natural systems and elements therein are key actors and have agency in a post-growth worldview. “Nature, justice and time”, the “three realities missing in mainstream economics” (Faber 2008), are central to a post-growth economy embedded in society.

Thousands of environmental and social movements across the world contribute to and enrich post-growth thinking and practice. They include ones demanding environmental justice (EJAtlas.org); seeking the abolition of fossil fuels (gofossilfree.org); creating peasant solidarity and food sovereignty (viacampesina.org); enabling social solidarity (ripest.org); empowering the confluence of alternatives (vikalpsangam.org); and building resilient, locally aligned, and viable economies (steadystatemanchester.net).

While Bhutan’s celebrated Gross National Happiness estimates may not be democratically deliberated, the “radical ecological democracy” perfected by the Mendha Lekha villagers (Gadchiroli district) in India, Brazil’s solidarity economics, and the just and viable meso-level economy promoted by Steady State Manchester in the UK, reveal deliberative mechanisms. These are necessary to make informed choices about work and the sharing of work; care giving and other unpaid work; and shifting workers in the fossil fuel industry to other jobs. Deliberations are also about incomes and social security; technologies; the quantity and sources of energy accessed and used by households, schools, hospitals and farms; and guaranteed basic needs. While deeper and more engaging research is needed at the macro-economic level, the meso-level becomes important for a post-growth ecological democracy to work and to make choices that are just and meaningful.

Inclusion of real stocks and funds: Post-growth thinking demands a substantive understanding of social-economic systems. It builds on bio-economics, which observes and analyses the flow of stocks and funds in social-economic systems, and not merely the exchange value of goods and services that are produced and consumed in a given time period (Georgescu-Roegen 2011).

Stocks or ores, fossil fuels, minerals and metals, and the limited reservoirs of matter that we extract and use for energy generation and industrial use are made available to us over geological time scales by nature. When seen as a common and shared planetary inheritance, these stocks are not private or public property; they belong to nature.

Since the pace of conversion of these stocks into economic activities—with increasing heat, material and energy loss, and pollution—has pushed the planet to the brink of collapse, post-growth demands collective ownership, ending all harmful subsidies, a ban on extraction or at least an immediate shrinking of extractive industries. This is the best way to limit human interference on the planet within a safe operating space, a sustainability zone.

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Funds or resources that renew themselves over biological time, whether on a daily basis (like sunlight) or seasonal (like a crop) or over decades (like a forest), are composed of and maintained by solar radiation. Available in diffused or non-concentrated forms, funds have bio-geophysical cycles, and need rest and rejuvenation. They help build production processes with no externalities, as desired in a post-growth society. There is no waste; only joint products produced within nature's nested circles in least disruptive ways. There is no transfer of social and environmental costs to a poorer country or tribal community within a nation state.

A post-growth society will not conduct international trade in waste (whether carbon, nuclear or industrial or household waste), create landfills, or dump plastic in the oceans. Since the social and economic systems operate on funds, a post-growth system creates appropriate institutions or norms to ban, tax, or steadily reduce and replace all harmful joint products. Maintaining a healthy social metabolism is crucial.

Methods accounting for social metabolism or measures of the entire flow of materials and energy are central to a post-growth society to sustain economic activities essential for a good life. Whether within an urban ecosystem or in a nation state, a materials and energy flow analysis (MEFA) estimate gives us an understanding of how matter or joules of energy flow through the economy. A post-growth society measures economic activities in substantive terms (and not in the monetised formalism of economics), and balks at green growth that guzzles stocks or rare minerals extracted at immense social and environmental costs to generate more renewable energy (hydrogen cells, lithium batteries, or even solar panels and windmills) for urban consumption.

Post-growth economies will avoid the extraction of rare minerals and account for grasslands, pastures, habitats, and homes destroyed by the renewable energy industry. Ultimately our energy use has to be reduced, and accessed and secured in different and diffused bio-economic forms that are available as funds in nature.

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The three post-growth norms or principles highlighted here have parallels with the list of eight essential action points of a minimal bio-economic programme (Georgescu-Roegen 1975) that were given to us decades ago. Even as we know that human society will not get back to villages or caves or to a biomass-based production system, the list includes

- (i) Prohibition of the production of all instruments of war so that “tremendous productive forces can be released”;
- (ii) Supporting these productive forces with “well-planned and sincerely intended measures” to help people in underdeveloped nations achieve “a good (not luxurious) life”;
- (iii) Consciously lowering population and consumption so that mankind can “be adequately fed only by organic agriculture”;
- (iv) Carefully avoiding and strictly regulating the waste of energy “until direct use of solar energy becomes a general convenience or controlled fusion is achieved”;
- (v) Curing ourselves of the craving for unnecessary gadgetry;
- (vi) Getting rid of fashion and fashion industry through conscious “consumer education”, forcing manufacturers “to focus on durability”;
- (vii) Increased production of durable goods that are made “more durable by being designed so as to be repaired”; and
- (viii) Demanding and arriving at a pace of life that gives us a good life with “a substantial amount of leisure spent in an intelligent manner” (Georgescu-Roegen 1975, pp. 377–78).

The politics of post-growth is a painful reality we confront today. Few of these suggestions for a sustainable bio-economy have been taken up. Scholars, activists, and ordinary citizens do debate, research and learn together in networks of Degrowth Research (degrowth.org) and Global Politics of Post Growth (twitter.com/GPPG network). But these are forums of the already converted—those with questions about a just and sustainable future on earth. How do we reach the ones who are still committed to growth, incapable of imagining and creating a post-growth world?

The work on agro-ecological transitions presents two broad approaches (Levidow et al 2014) to achieve a post-growth policy uptake at scale. The first approach—to enter the state or the institutional architecture and stretch and transform it from within—is not easy. But it is now being attempted in several contexts in the European Union and in some other projects such as the municipal governments of Berlin (Germany) and Bogota (Colombia) through specific post-growth research grants, public dialogues, sustainable infrastructure, and dignified jobs.

The second is to confront and challenge the state to ensure that extractive industry is banned, that conservation of land races of crops and local biodiversity is incentivised and celebrated, and so on. There is a dire need for post-growth academia and activism in the global North and global South to share experiences, learn from and with each other.

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Post-growth thinking in/for India: What is in it for India? This is a key question for anyone from or concerned about development in the global South. India is not new to post-growth thinking. While M.K. Gandhi is central to Indian post-growth thinking with his proposal of gram swaraj (self-reliant village) and a lifestyle built on a theory of sufficiency and fairness, there are others whose post-growth theories have left their mark.

Among them, Joseph Kumarappa's "economy of permanence" went a step further in arguing not just for localism and artisanal and peasant production systems, but also for planning and investing in village-centric economies. Globally, Ivan Illich and E.F. Schumacher promoting intermediate, appropriate, small and sustainable infrastructure, technology and entrepreneurship were influenced by Kumarappa's ideas for low throughput economies that maintained social and ecological health. Rabindranath Tagore's articulation of modern economies and capitalist production as problematic in their utilitarian understanding of human relationships and in their indifference to increasing inequality, echoed by Radhakamal Mukerjee, resounds today (Gerber and Raina 2018).

The second generation of post-growth articulations from scientists (natural and social sciences), activists, and Buddhist and Gandhian philosophers and activists, focus on livelihoods, energy security, and sustainable technologies and resources in rural and tribal communities. Though these are not labelled post-growth, they speak not for economic growth but for prosperity, justice and dignity for the poor and the environment.

All of them seek ways out of the oppressive knowledge politics and seek democratic deliberative governance of resources. India need not go through Western-style capital-intensive energy guzzling growth before turning to policies and investments for sustainability. We can plan a robust and resilient post-growth future now.

Acknowledging and accounting for the unpaid work and care giving that India's women do ... and revelling in the social and economic values they bring to the nation, will be a great transformation.

Post-growth, building on a massive young workforce in agriculture, meso-level short-value networks and local bazaars/markets that India has in abundance and amazing diversity, offers opportunities for dignified work for all, prosperity, and well-being. This will involve bringing back agro-ecological production and consumption systems, labour-using technologies in village-centric regional economies, and creating and deploying more of public investments.

India has an abundance of reusing and repairing skills, and decentralised technology choices to work on multiple joint products (avoiding waste and landfills). Acknowledging and accounting for the unpaid work and care giving that India's women do, including them in the post-growth workforce, and revelling in the social and economic values they bring to the nation, will be a great transformation.

The key question is whether India will acknowledge the limits to growth, the post-growth opportunities available, and lead the way to a just, sustainable and equitable national and global social-economic system.

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