

Jenseits des Wachstums?!

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Forum 01: Muss der Kapitalismus wachsen?

Answering the question «Must capitalism grow?» presuppose first to define growth.

What is called growth by economists is the quantitative measure of production, with the gross national product. This process of accumulation of goods is continuous throughout the history of capitalism, with variations according to periods and to geographical spaces. The growth can be slow as it was during the 19th century and as it is in the old industrial nations since the 1980's. So the problem for the capitalist system is not so much the growth rate than the continuity of the global process of accumulation, that is the process of production and consumption. The global growth mobilises some work and capital goods, as explained in the economic models. But it mobilises also natural resources (materials and energy) which are limited, and which, contrary to the economic models, cannot be replaced by technical capital. The question is thus: how and under what conditions is economic growth possible in our current system? The capitalist process of production-consumption feeds on the continuous expropriation and destruction of the conditions and forms of life which escape valuation. This expropriation implies the acceleration of the extraction of natural resources, the conquest of the infinitesimal, the conquest of the biodiversity.

This means that the capitalist system cannot grow exponentially in a natural system that is finite, or rather it can with incurring heavy socio-environmental destructions, many of which are irreversible and can lead to the point of no-return. Nevertheless the issue doesn't concern only capitalism: any production system is a subsystem of the biosphere which makes its existence possible in terms of materials and energy. Biophysical degrowth is necessary, not as a result of negative fluctuations in the economy, but by establishing concrete limits and reductions in the use of materials and energy. This can come true at a micro-economic level in the capitalist system with green technologies, but at a global level, it supposes (because of the Jevons effect) a reduction of the material consumptions and goods, and so a reduction of the expansion area of capitalism. Green capitalism or green growth are not solutions for the future: they are already working for thirty years by defending economic growth as a condition for sustainability, by putting forward market mechanisms to manage nature and by «geoengineering» nature.

So we have to take in account the second meaning of growth as a representation of an economic society (K. Polanyi), which makes fast economic growth a political objective, an imperative and civic virtue and the way for happiness and justice. Such ideology reduces the society to a workers and consumers one (H. Arendt). Neoliberal society has speeded up this process, all over the world, in a way that is now more aggressive and unequal than it has ever been in the history of humanity. Even in the social democratic tradition, growth has been seen as the condition of social justice: increase the cake to share it better, without caring about the recipe and about the ingredients. And it is the mirage of economic growth thanks to free trade and competition that made a major part of the social democracy slide towards the neoliberal politics since the 1980's. The development of productive forces (marxist tradition) is not the condition of emancipation; in a finite world this growth expropriates people more and more and destroys the conditions of life of human beings.

The practices and the ideas to open a transition (now and not for the future) towards an ecologically, democratically and socially sustainable world are already here: they follow several ways and we have to make them stronger and more visible. We have also to consider a very important new element: the criticism of the society of growth also expresses itself in the

southern countries in a significant way, in particular in the refusal of the faster and faster extraction of natural resources. The argument of poverty in rich countries and above all in developing nations used to be set against the critics of the growth; it is good today that the major wound of the world is the wealth and the unegalitarian accumulation of wealth. No democratic and fair transition will be possible without releasing itself of the paradigm of growth and productivism.