

Abstract Submission

11th International Conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics

Preliminary title/Subtitle:

Empowering Degrowth -
Addressing Power Issues for the Transformation Towards a Degrowth Society

(Sub)themes:

- Post-growth economics: Degrowth
- Power, politics, institutions and the reality of achieving change: The role of social movements in the sustainability revolution

Summary:

Every social development includes conflicts, struggles and the giving up of privileges, which essentially result in questions of power. However, degrowth as a counterbalance to the social and ecological destructive pervading growth ideology does not consider the relevance of power sufficiently. The debate on the degrowth/power nexus is essentially underdeveloped in the literature on degrowth, which not only restricts the scope of discussion but has also strategic implications for the establishment of a social movement. This paper discusses existing frameworks of power with regard to their relevance for degrowth and hereby intends to provide a starting point for the debate on conceptualizing power for degrowth. Based on Steven Lukes' three-dimensional approach to power, John Gaventa's framework of the power cube is furthermore used for a first attempt of conceptualizing power for degrowth. A workshop with a focus group will not only test the theory, but also support activists and provide empirical insights. The paper therefore interconnects research and activism and hereby touches upon a core element of degrowth.

Extended Abstract:

Degrowth as a social movement as well as theoretical counterbalance of the socio-ecologically unjust depletion and distribution of resources gains increasing popularity in current times of multiple crisis. Being not merely an economic but a transdisciplinary realm, many perspectives on degrowth are emerging in research. However, the overarching question of power remains up to now surprisingly untouched

although highly relevant for the discussion of a degrowth society. At the same time, many predominant power structures need to be dissolved or at least restructured for a potentially functioning degrowth society. This paper wants to initiate a debate on the role of power for a degrowth society and aims to provide potential solutions.

Developments in the power discourse from the 1960s onwards have led to a highly diversified conceptualization of power. Different conceptualizations are put in juxtaposition and their applicability for addressing power issues in the degrowth context is discussed.

The classical Hobbesian perspective is coined by a causal and visible exertion of power. This is still relevant today as environmental conflicts, resource extractivism, unfair resource distribution and similar social-ecological problems fuelled by the capitalist growth regime are visible effects of exploitation and deprive large parts of the world population from the benefits enjoyed by the few. Those “imperial forms of living” (Brand/Wissen 2011) are also addressed by the environmental justice movements of the Global South, which need to be considered for stronger alliance with the Degrowth movement in the Global North (Martinez-Alier 2012).

This visible aspect of power is considered as the first dimension of Lukes’ (2005) theory of three-dimensional power. The second dimension applied to more hidden forms of power (Bachrach/Baratz 1970). Here, decision-making is intentionally limited to relatively non-controversial matters and is therefore the “mobilization of bias” (Schattschneider 1960, 71). Both these dimensions stress the existence of observable conflict, overt or covert. If there is no conflict, consensus on the prevailing allocation of values is assumed.

This is challenged by the framework’s third dimension, which allows for a very latent form of domination in which acquiesce might be fulfilled without awareness. It not only leads to acquiesce but people may even celebrate their domination by actively supporting the oppressive values. This shows interesting parallels to the concept of hegemony, which also becomes apparent with Lukes characterization of a “Gramsci-inspired liberal-Marxist” (Haugaard 2010, 421).

John Gaventa’s conceptualization of the powercube is based on Steven Lukes’ three-dimensional approach to power. The powercube is a framework for analysing the levels (local, national, global), spaces (closed, invited, claimed) and forms (visible, hidden, invisible) of power, and their interrelationship (see figure attached). In a first step, the growth discourse in general and specific degrowth related struggles in

particular (such as environmental conflicts, consumerism, the rhetoric of growth as development, etc.) is applied to the theoretical framework of the power cube. Based on that, a workshop is designed and conducted with a focus-group including participants who are active in degrowth research and activism. The workshop is aimed to take place at the envisioned Degrowth Summer School 2015. Another interesting option would be to run the focus group at the ESEE conference itself, due to the unique availability of researchers familiar with the limits-to-growth and degrowth discourse. The findings of this workshop will then serve as the basis for an empirical part of the paper, which will be further established after the conference. Running a small prototype version of the workshop prior to the conference can be a possibility to present preliminary empirical results in addition to the theoretical framing. This is an attempt both, theoretically conceptualize power for a degrowth project as part of a broader socio-ecological transformation as well as apply the framework for empirical testing and contribute to knowledge creation for activism. The paper therefore interconnects research and activism and hereby touches upon a core element of degrowth and the socio-ecological transformation in general. Analysing the role of power from a degrowth-perspective will not only help to understand existing power relations but also support a non-authoritarian transformation towards a degrowth society.

The paper will contain the preliminary results of my master's thesis of the M.Sc. "Socio-Ecological Economics & Policy" (SEEP) programme at the Vienna University of Economics and Business. A preliminary version of the paper was already presented at the "1st Austrian Conference on International Resource Politics" in Vienna 4.-6. December 2014. The feedback will lead to refinement and improvements, which I hope to present at the ESEE Conference 2015 as a further step towards publication.

The paper integrates a range of thematic strands of the ESEE conference including post-growth economics, the distribution of power, theory & methods for ecological economics and also touches upon several special sessions.

Literature:

- Bachrach, P., Baratz, M. S. 1970. "Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice". New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brand, U. / Wissen, M. 2011. "Die Regulation der ökologischen Krise – Theorie und Empirie der Transformation gesellschaftlicher Naturverhältnisse". *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 36 (2): 12-34.

- Gaventa, J. 2005. „Reflections on the Uses of the ‘Power Cube’ Approach for Analyzing the Spaces, Places and Dynamics of Civil Society Participation and Engagement“. CFP evaluation series 2003-2006: no 4, Sussex.
- Haugaard, M. 2010. “Power: A ‘family resemblance’ concept”. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (4): 419-438.
- Lukes, S. 2005. “Power: A Radical View”. 2nd Edition. Hampshire: Palgrave McMillan.
- Martínez-Alier, J. 2012. “Environmental Justice and Economic Degrowth: An Alliance Between two Movements”. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 23 (1): 51-73
- Schattschneider, E. E. 1960. “The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America”. New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston.

