

Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: a preliminary conversation

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Abstract This paper seeks to initiate a conversation between degrowth (DG) and postdevelopment (PD) frameworks by placing them within the larger field of discourses for ecological and civilizational transitions and by bridging proposals emerging from the North with those from the Global South. Not only can this dialogue, it is argued, be mutually enriching for both movements but perhaps essential for an effective politics of transformation. Part I of the paper presents a brief panorama of transition discourses (TDs), particularly in the North. Part II discusses succinctly the main postdevelopment trends in Latin America, including Buen Vivir (BV), the rights of Nature, civilizational crisis, and the concept of ‘alternatives to development’. With these elements in hand, Part III attempts a preliminary dialogue between degrowth and postdevelopment, identifying points of convergence and tension; whereas 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. Important tensions remain, for instance, around the critique of modernity and the scope for dematerialization. This part ends by outlining areas of

research on PD that could be of particular interest to degrowth scholars. The conclusion, finally, envisions the dissolution of the very binary of ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ by adopting a pluriversal perspective.

Keywords Degrowth · Postdevelopment · Transitions · Civilizational crisis · Global South

Introduction: from crises to transitions

This paper is based on a twofold proposition: first, that degrowth (DG) and postdevelopment (PD) frameworks and strategies will benefit greatly from placing them within the larger context of discourses and proposals for ecological and cultural transitions that have been emerging forcefully over the past decade and second, that it is imperative to establish bridges between degrowth and transition proposals in the Global North and those in the Global South. Concerning the first point, degrowth and postdevelopment can be seen as belonging to the larger class of ‘transition discourses’ (TDs) that call for a significant paradigmatic or civilizational transformation; in terms of the second proposition, there undoubtedly is an uneven and differentiated character of TDs in the Global North and the Global South.

In other words, to fully understand the emergence and potentiality of degrowth and postdevelopment it is important to consider, first, the entire ensemble of TDs and, second, the bridges that can be established between northern and southern TDs, to come up with a clearer picture of what might constitute a radical and effective politics for transformation. 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

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to consider them inapplicable to their contexts. There has been little concerted effort at bringing these two sets of discourses and strategies into a dialogue that would be mutually enriching.¹

The forceful emergence of transition discourses in multiple sites of academic and activist life over the past decade is one of the most anticipatory signs of our times. This emergence is a reflection of both the steady worsening of planetary ecological, social, and cultural conditions and of the inability of established policy and knowledge institutions to imagine ways out of such crises. Shared by most TDs is the contention that we need to step out of existing institutional and epistemic boundaries if we truly want to envision the worlds and practices capable of bringing about the significant transformations seen as needed. Transition discourses take as their point of departure the notion that the contemporary ecological and social crises are inseparable from the model of social life that has become dominant over the past few centuries. There are many ways to refer to this model: industrialism, capitalism, modernity, (neo)liberalism, anthropocentrism, rationalism, patriarchy, secularism, or even Judeo-Christian civilization. Whatever concept is emphasized, TDs envision a radical transformation. It should be stressed, however, that both the form of the model and the type of crisis are differently seen and experienced in different world regions. While in Europe, for instance, the current conjuncture is marked by the crises of advanced capitalism, the downsizing of the welfare State, and the financial crisis in the Euro zone countries, in Latin America the model is seen as shaped by extractive policies and the vagaries of commodity prices, which may determine the continuation, or exhaustion, of this model. In both cases, the common denominator is the pressures exerted by neo-liberal globalization.

Part I of the paper presents a brief panorama of TDs, particularly in the North. Part II discusses succinctly the main proposals for transitions emerging from the Global South; the discussion is restricted to trends in Latin America, including *Buen Vivir*, the rights of Nature, civilizational crisis, and the concepts of postdevelopment and ‘alternatives to development’. With these elements in hand, Part III attempts a preliminary dialogue between degrowth and postdevelopment; it identifies points of convergence and tension, and it outlines some emergent areas of postdevelopment research which could be of

particular interest to degrowth scholars. The conclusion muses over the possibility of the dissolution of the constructs of ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’, fostering conditions for the dialogue between degrowth and post-development from the perspective of a pluriversal politics.

Locating degrowth and postdevelopment within discourses of transition

Arguments about the need for an epochal transition are a sign of the times. While talk of crises and transitions have a long genealogy in the West, transition discourses (TDs) are emerging today with particular richness, diversity, and intensity to the point that a veritable field of ‘transition studies’ can be posited as a scholarly political domain. Notably, as even a cursory mapping of TDs would suggest, those writing on the subject are not limited to the academy; in fact, the most visionary TD thinkers are located outside of it, even if they often engage with critical academic currents. TDs are emerging from a multiplicity of sites, principally social movements and some NGOs, and from intellectuals with significant connections to environmental and cultural struggles. TDs are prominent in the fields of culture, ecology, religion and spirituality, alternative science (e.g., complexity), food and energy, and digital technologies.²

The range of TDs can only be hinted at here: in the North, the most prominent include degrowth (often associated with work on commoning and the commons; Bollier 2014); a variety of transition initiatives (TIs); debates on the anthropocene; forecasting trends (e.g. Randers 2012); inter-religious dialogues; and some UN processes, particularly within the Stakeholders Forum. Among the TIs are the Transition Town Initiative (UK), the great transition initiative (Tellus Institute, US), the Great Turning (Joanna Macy), the Great Work or transition to an Ecozoic era (Thomas Berry), and the transition from an age of Enlightenment to one of Sustainment (Fry 2012) or Enlivenment (Weber 2013), and from the Age of Separation (of individuals from community and of humans from the rest of the living world) to an Age of Reunion (Eisenstein 2013). In the Global South, TDs include postdevelopment and alternatives to development, crisis of civilizational model, *Buen Vivir* and the rights of nature, communal logics, and transitions to post-extractivism. While the features of the age to come include, in the North,

¹ Some of this conversation happened at the III International Conference of Degrowth, particularly around the work of Helena Norber-Hodge, Veronika Bennholt-Thomsen, Gilbert Rist, and the author of this paper. While authors such as Latouche (e.g., 2009) and Martinez Alier (2002a, b) have long incorporated views from the South, taken as a whole the DG field has not cultivated this line of inquiry. See the recent reviews by Muraca (2013) and Demaria et al. (2013) in which critiques of development are included.

² I use the term ‘transition’ rather than ‘transformation’ since this is the actual term used by most of the frameworks discussed here. Some of the TDs can be criticized on many grounds (e.g., their lack of attention to questions of power and domination in terms of class, gender and race). However, it seems to me that most imply a radical notion of transformation at many levels. In some cases, ‘transition’ is very similar to ‘transformation’ (especially in the Polanyian sense), in others transition entails many types of transformation.

post-growth, post-materialist, post-economic, post-capitalist, and post-human, those for the south are expressed in terms of post-development, non-liberal, post/non-capitalist, biocentric, and post-extractivist (see Escobar 2011, 2014 for further treatment).

A hallmark of most contemporary TDs is the fact that they posit a radical cultural and institutional transformation—a transition to an altogether different world. This is variously conceptualized in terms of a paradigm shift (e.g., Raskin et al. 2002; Shiva 2008), a change of civilizational model (indigenous movements), the rise of a new, holistic culture, or even the coming of an entirely new era beyond the modern dualist (e.g., Goodwin 2007; Macy 2012; Macy and Brown 1998), reductionist (e.g., Kauffman 2008), economic (e.g., Schafer 2008), and anthropocentric (e.g., Weber 2013; Eisenstein 2013; Goodwin 2007) age. This change is seen as already under way, although most TDs warn that the results are by no means guaranteed. Even the most secular visions emphasize a deep transformation of values. The most imaginative TDs link together aspects that have remained separate in previous imaginings of social transformation: ontological, cultural, politico-economic, ecological, and spiritual. These are brought together by a profound concern with human suffering and with the fate of life itself. Some of these emphases are absent from DG and PD theories or only hinted at obliquely. Let us listen to a few statements on the transition.³

Thomas Berry's notion of The Great Work—a transition “from the period when humans were a disruptive force on the planet Earth to the period when humans become present to the planet in a manner that is mutually enhancing” (1999, p. 11; 1988)—has been influential in TDs. Berry calls the new era Ecozoic.⁴ For Berry, “the deepest cause of the present devastation is found in the mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the humans and other modes of being and the bestowal of all rights on the humans” (p. 4).⁵ The divide between human

and nonhuman domains is at the basis of many of the critiques, along with the idea of a separate self. Macy (2012) speaks of a cognitive and spiritual revolution which involves the replacement of the modern self with an ecological, nondualist self that reconnects with all beings and recovers a sense of evolutionary time, effaced by the linear time of capitalist modernity. Some recent TDs also emphasize the idea—well-known and dear to many place-based and indigenous peoples—that consciousness and meaning are the property of all living beings (and even matter), not just of humans, that is, that the universe is one of pansentience (e.g., Goodwin 2007; Weber 2013; Ingold 2011).⁶

Common to many transitions discourses, and well exemplified by the Great Transition Initiative (GTI), is that humanity is entering a planetary phase of civilization as a result of the accelerating expansion of the modern era; a global system is taking shape with fundamental differences from previous historical phases. The character of the transition will depend on which worldview prevails. The GTI distinguishes among three worldviews or mindsets—evolutionary, catastrophic, and transformational—with their corresponding global scenarios: conventional worlds, barbarization, and the great transition (GT). Only the latter promises lasting solutions to the sustainability challenges, but it requires fundamental changes in values and novel socio-economic and institutional arrangements. As with some of the degrowth narratives, the GT paradigm redefines progress in terms of non-material human fulfillment. It highlights interconnectedness and envisions the decoupling of wellbeing from growth and consumption, and the cultivation of new values (e.g., solidarity, ethics, community, meaning). The GT involves an alternative global vision that replaces ‘industrial capitalism’ with a ‘civilizing globalization’.

Many TDs are keyed into the need to move to post-carbon economies. Vandana Shiva has brought this point home with special force. For Shiva (2005, 2008), the key to the transition ‘from oil to soil’—from a mechanical-industrial paradigm centered on globalized markets to a people- and planet-centered one—lies in strategies of re-localization, that is, the construction of decentralized, biodiversity-based organic food and energy systems operating on the basis of grassroots democracy, local economies, and the preservation of soils and ecological integrity. TDs of this kind exhibit an acute consciousness of the rights of communities to their territories, the tremendously uneven patterns of global consumption and environmental

³ The TDs cited here represent a fraction of the literature. TDs range from the more spiritual to the openly political; they appeal to a broad array of concepts, such as ‘collapse’, ‘conscious evolution’, collective intelligence, sacredness, saving the planet and the humans, decline and descent, survival, apocalypse and utopia, and so forth. There are lots to be learned from these visions and proposals, which academics rarely consider. Works on ecologically-oriented design could also be considered in this light, but they will not be discussed here; see Escobar (2014) for a more exhaustive discussion of TDs and design.

⁴ See the work of the Center for Ecozoic Societies in Chapel Hill, directed by Herman Greene, <http://www.ecozoicstudies.org/>.

⁵ Berry actually posited a definition of the anthropocene *avant la lettre*; in a beautiful essay from 1988, he wrote: “The anthropogenic shock that is overwhelming the earth is of an order of magnitude beyond anything previously known in human historical or cultural development.... We are acting on a geological and biological order of magnitude. We are changing the chemistry of the planet” (1988, p. 211, 206).

⁶ This is an exciting, and growing area, even in some critical strands of the academy. Within the West, it has predecessors in the works of Vernadsky and Teilhard de Chardin, among others, but also in traditions of immanence, vitalism, and process thought. It should be emphasized that a sentient universe is a core idea—indeed, a reality—of many indigenous cosmologies.

impact. Critiques of capitalism, cultural change, spirituality, and ecology are woven together in the various diagnosis of the problem and possible ways forward (see also, e.g., Korten 2006; Mooney et al. 2006; Sachs and Santarius 2007; Santos 2007). An ‘ecology of transformation’ (Hathaway and Boff 2009) is seen as the route to counteract the ravages of global capitalism and for constructing sustainable communities; its main components are ecological justice, biological and cultural diversity, bioregionalism, rootedness in place, participatory democracy, and cooperative self-organization. Some of these dimensions are dear to DG and PD discourses, yet others are insufficiently developed (such as the emphases on place and spirituality), perhaps because of their more secular and academic orientations.

One of the most concrete proposals for a transition to a post-fossil fuel society is the transition town initiative (TTI; see Hopkins 2008, 2011). This compelling vision includes both post-peak oil scenarios and a primer for towns to move along the transition timeline. The re-localization of food, energy, housing, transportation, and decision-making are crucial elements of the TTI. The TTI contemplates the reinvigoration of communities so that they become more self-reliant, lower energy infrastructures and tools for rebuilding ecosystems and communities eroded by centuries of delocalized, expert-driven economic and political systems. Resilience is the TTI’s alternative to conventional notions of sustainability; it requires seeding communities with diversity, social and ecological self-organization, strengthening the capability to produce locally what can be produced locally, and so forth. While the TTI approach has a great deal of visibility in the DG movement, it is barely known among those writing about PD. Some of the reasons for this unevenness will be explored in the next section.⁷

To sum up: transition discourses posit a profound cultural, economic, and political transformation of dominant institutions and practices. By making visible the damaging effects of dominant models of social life (e.g., the individual, the market, capitalism, consumption, separation from nature, and so forth) they direct our attention to the need to transform culture and economy, often times in tandem with those communities where the regimes of the individual, separation, and the market have not yet taken a complete hold on socio-natural life. In emphasizing the inter-dependence of all beings, TDs bring to the fore one of

the crucial imperatives of our time: the need to reconnect with each other and with the nonhuman world. The re-localization of food, energy, and the economy is seen as essential for the transitions, often advocating for a diverse economy with strong communal bases, even if not bound to the local (Gibson-Graham 2006; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). These are all important dimensions to be taken into account in DG and PD frameworks and initiatives.

Postdevelopment and the thought of transitions

There is likely no other social and policy domain where the paradigm of growth has been most persistently deployed than that of ‘development’. Starting in the late 1980s, a growing number of cultural critics in many parts of the world questioned the very idea of development. They analyzed development as a discourse of Western origin that operated as a powerful mechanism for the cultural, social, and economic production of the Third World (Rist 1997; Escobar 2011). These analyses entailed a radical questioning of the core assumptions of development, including growth, progress, and instrumental rationality and as such were important in early degrowth theories in Italy and France. These critiques came of age with the publication in 1992 of a collective volume, *The Development Dictionary*; the book started with the startling claim, “The last 40 years can be called the age of development. This epoch is coming to an end. The time is ripe to write its obituary” (Sachs 1992, p. 1). If development was dead, what would come after? Some started to talk about a ‘post-development era’ in response to this question, and a second collective work, *The Post-development Reader* (Escobar 1992; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997), launched the project of giving content to this notion. Some degrowth theorists, notably Latouche (2009), contributed to disseminate this perspective in the North.⁸

Postdevelopment advocates claimed that development constituted a set of discourses and practices which had profound impact on how Asia, Africa, and Latin America came to be seen as ‘underdeveloped’ since the early post-World War II period and treated as such thereafter. It was meant to designate three inter-related things: first, the need to decenter development, that is, to displace it from its centrality in the representations about conditions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. (In this way, postdevelopment is related to degrowth and postcapitalism, that is, questioning capitalism’s ability to fully and naturally occupy the economy). A corollary of this first goal was to open up the

⁷ The *transition town approach* is a remarkable concept and set of tools. Initiated in the town of Totnes, Devon, UK (also home to Schumacher College), it has spread rapidly. There are close to 500 communities world-wide (largely in the North) engaged in transition plans inspired by the approach. The primer for transition initiatives is detailed and feasible. See the TTI’s website, <http://www.transitionnet.org/blogs/rob-hopkins>.

⁸ For recent statements and critiques of postdevelopment in English, see Dar and Cooke (2008), McGregor (2009), Mosse and Lewis (2005), Zai (2007) and Simon (2007).

discursive space to other ways of describing those conditions, less mediated by the premises of ‘development.’ Second, postdevelopment theorists suggested that it was indeed possible to think about the end of development. It identified alternatives to development, rather than development alternatives, as a concrete possibility. Third, they emphasized the importance of transforming development’s order of expert knowledge and power. To this end, they proposed that the more useful ideas about alternatives could be gleaned from the practices of grassroots movements.

Postdevelopment did not have much practical effect in Latin America beyond restricted circles until recently. This situation has changed over the past decade. The main impetus behind the resurgence of critical debates on development has been social movements. Two key areas of debate closely related to PD are the notions of Buen Vivir (Good Life or collective wellbeing according to culturally-appropriate conceptions; *sumak kawsay* in Quechua and *suma qamaña* in Aymara) and the rights of Nature. Defined as a holistic, de-economized view of social life, Buen Vivir “constitutes an alternative to development, and as such it represents a potential response to the substantial critiques of postdevelopment” (Gudynas and Acosta 2011, p. 78). Very succinctly,⁹ the Buen Vivir (BV) grew out of indigenous struggles as they articulated with social change agendas by peasants, Afro-descendants, environmentalists, students, women, and youth. Crystallized in the recent Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions, the BV “presents itself as an opportunity for the collective construction of a new form of living” (Acosta 2010, p. 7; Gudynas 2011a, b). Echoing indigenous ontologies, the BV makes possible the subordination of economic objectives to ecological criteria, human dignity, and social justice. Buen Vivir is not purely an Andean cultural-political project, as it is influenced by critical currents within Western thought, and it aims to influence global debates. The debates about the form BV might take in modern urban contexts and other parts of the world, such as Europe, is beginning to take place. Degrowth and BV could be ‘fellow travelers’ in this endeavor.¹⁰

Buen Vivir resonates with broader challenges to the ‘civilizational model’ of globalized development. The crisis of the Western *modelo civilizatorio* is invoked by many movements as the underlying cause of the current crisis of

climate, energy, poverty, and meaning. Echoing transition discourses, a shift to a new cultural and economic paradigm is recognized as needed and under construction.¹¹ This emphasis is strongest among ethnic movements, yet it is also found, for instance, in agroecological networks for which only a shift toward agroecological food production systems can lead us out of the climate and food crises (e.g., Via Campesina). Closely related is the ‘transitions to post-extractivism’ framework. Originally proposed by the Centro Latinoamericano de Ecología Social (CLAES) in Montevideo, it has become an important intellectual-activist debate in many South American countries (Alayza and Gudynas 2011; Gudynas 2011b, 2015b; Massuh 2012; Veraldi and Polatsik 2012; Esteva 2012). The point of departure is a critique of the intensification of extractivist models based on large-scale mining, hydrocarbon exploitation, or extensive agricultural operations, particularly for agrofuels, such as soy, sugar cane or oil palm; whether in the form of conventional—often brutal—neoliberal extractivist operations in countries like Colombia, Perú or México, or following the neo-extractivism of the progressive regimes, these are often legitimized as the most efficient growth strategies. This transitions proposal demonstrates that “there is life after extractivism” (Gudynas 2012). Given the avalanche of highly destructive, extractivist projects all over Latin America and much of the world the usefulness of this framework to buttress critiques of the growth model and DG and PD strategies must be explored further.

Building bridges between degrowth, postdevelopment, and alternatives to development¹²

Despite the near-hegemony of the extractivist economic model in Latin America, it has been argued that there is a mood at present “to search for alternatives in a deeper sense, aiming to break away from the cultural and ideological bases of development, bringing forth other imaginaries, goals, and practices” (Gudynas and Acosta 2011, p. 75). These positions cause a strong reaction among those, whether in the North or South, for whom some version of modernity (capitalist, liberal, or socialist) continues to be the only valid horizon of thought and action (Gudynas 2013). Here lies another challenge for the DG and PD movements.

⁹ For analyses of the notions of Buen Vivir and rights of Nature, see the useful short volumes by Acosta (2010), Acosta and Martínez (2009a, b) and Gudynas (2009, 2011a, 2015a). There is a considerable literature on these topics; see Escobar (2011; 2014) for a list of pertinent references. The monthly journal *América Latina en Movimiento* is an excellent source of intellectual-activist writings on these subjects, with special issues on Buen Vivir (452, 462), transitions (473), postdevelopment (445), and so forth (alainet.org).

¹⁰ There are related notions in the South, such as the Southern Africa notion of *ubuntu*, which cannot be discussed here.

¹¹ See issue no. 453 of *América Latina en Movimiento* (March 2010) devoted to “Alternativas civilizatorias”, <http://alainet.org/publica/453.phtml>. A Forum on “perspectives on the ‘Crisis of Civilization’ as the Focus of Movements” was held at the World Social Forum in Dakar (February 6–11, 2011), coordinated by Roberto Espinoza, Janet Conway, Jai Sen, and Carlos Torres.

¹² See Escobar (2014) for an extensive bibliography on critical development approaches and emergent research areas.

It thus seems a good moment to build explicit bridges between transitions narratives in the North and in the South, while respecting their historical, geopolitical, and epistemic specificities. In building these bridges, it is necessary to keep in mind several factors. First, it is important to resist 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; while acknowledging the need for real improvements in people’s livelihoods, public services, and so forth, it is imperative for groups in the South to avoid endorsing growth as the basis for these improvements; a key criteria is that *growth and the economy should be subordinated to BV and the rights of nature, not the other way around*.

As the transitions to post-extractivism framework shows, there is fallacy in thinking that growth-oriented extractivism leads to BV, as it is based on a model that is highly destructive of ecosystems and communities. Buen Vivir poses veritable challenges to modernist and neo-liberal frameworks. It is important for Northern critics of growth to study this notion in depth, so that it is not so easily dismissed as localist or unrealistic; by reflecting upon the premises of BV, as articulated in the South, northerners will be more likely to open up to transitions beyond the dominant forms of Euro-modernity.

What follows are some specific observations and propositions that must be taken as partial and provisional, starting with some commonalities and points of tension between DG and PD. These will be followed by some key areas of work in PD that could be of particular interest to DG analysts.

Commonalities and points of tension between degrowth and postdevelopment¹³

Both DG and PD can be said to be political imaginaries oriented towards substantial, if not radical, societal

transformation; if DG is said to articulate a potent and socially transformative political vision (Kallis 2011; Demaria et al. 2013; D’Alisa et al. 2015), the same can be said of PD. Both appeal to broad philosophical, cultural, ecological, and economic critiques of capitalism and the market, growth and development. They share some intellectual and social sources (e.g., Illich’s critique of industrialism and expert institutions; Polanyi’s analysis of the disembedding of the economy from social life; sustained attention to economic and ecological crises); however, some of the sources important for degrowth (e.g., bioeconomic approaches and spiritual traditions in some versions, see Muraca 2013) have little or no weight in PD. Conversely, traditions of thought that could be said to be part of the reservoir of PD have little presence in DG; examples or this are postcolonial and decolonial theories and critiques of modernity and development by Latin Americans and South Asians such as Ashis Nandy, Vandana Shiva, and Shiv Visvanathan (plus a new generation of activists-intellectuals in both regions). At the same time, DG has stronger ecological roots and visions (from strong sustainability and ecological economics to sustainable degrowth) than PD (with few exceptions), though paradoxically DG can be said to remain more anthropocentric than PD, where biocentrism, ‘rights of nature’ movements, and non-dualist approaches (below) have made more clear strides in recent years. Two reasons for this might be DG’s stronger tie to the project of rethinking the economy (even if, as DG theorists insist, DG is not just about growth or even solely about the economy) and DG’s insufficiently developed critique of modernity.

Degrowth and postdevelopment could also be said to have similar aims, up to a point. Degrowth, for instance, is said to be “a way to bring forward a new imaginary which implies a change of culture and a rediscovery of human identity which is disentangled from economic representations” (Demaria et al. 2013, p. 197); this new imaginary involves displacing markets “as a central organizing principle of human life” (Schneider et al. 2010; Sekulova et al. 2013, p. 1). These aims are shared by PD/AD, even if the strategies and emphases for post-economic, postgrowth, postcapitalist, and postdevelopment societies are somewhat different. For DG advocates, these goals have fostered a genuine social movement, understood in terms of the construction of an alternative interpretive frame of social life (Demaria et al. 2013, p. 194). Regardless of whether this is a sufficient criterion to identify a social movement, it is fair to say that PD rather than a social movement in itself operates through and with social movements. At their best, DG and PD/AD are likely to be more effective when they operate on the basis of *societies in movement* (Zibechi 2006), or even *worlds in movement* (Escobar 2014). One important point of theoretical and political convergence is

¹³ The references to DG in this section are largely based on the theoretical contributions to degrowth by the ICTA group (Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona); this group’s scholarly production evidences an impressive effort at building a comprehensive framework for degrowth. See especially Schneider et al. (2010), Martínez-Alier (2009), Kallis (2011), Kallis et al. (2012), Cattaneo et al. (2012), Sekulova et al. (2013), Demaria et al. (2013) and Asara et al. (2013). For PD and AD references, besides those cited, see also the “Grupo de Trabajo Permanente sobre Alternativas al Desarrollo”, based in Quito, sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation <http://www.rosalux.org.ec/es/ique-es-el-grupo-permanente-de-alternativas-al-desarrollo-128.html> (see Grupo Permanente 2011, 2013); and the platform Transiciones. Alternativas al desarrollo (<http://transiciones.org/>).

around the relation between ecology and social justice. Martinez-Alier emphasizes the fact that the rich environmental justice movements in the Global South (including climate and water justice, ecological debt, and so forth) can serve as strong bridges with degrowth (2012). Bond (2012) has similarly argued that climate justice will only be tackled effectively through transnational networks of movements and struggles.

Degrowth and PD/AD function through partially different practices. Over the past decade, DG has made strides in the consolidation of a cogent research program through international conferences and journals (involving universities, grants, and teaching) and through the creation of research networks, chiefly in Europe; for DG, research is an important part of the movement (e.g., Demaria et al. 2013, p. 204). For PD/AD, non-academic practices are more prominent, particularly within spaces bringing together activists and intellectuals, and sometimes academics and NGOs. This takes place through two main venues: the well-known methodology of workshops (*talleres*), most often organized by political or social movement organizations, with participation by local activists and community leaders and non-refereed (often activist) publications and web-based communiqués, declarations, booklets (*cartillas*), and so forth. This does not mean, of course, that non-academic events are not important for DG; as a movement, DG relies on practices such as alternative fairs and publications (there is a ‘submerged network’ of activism to which DG is connected); conversely, for PD and AD, academic events and publications also have importance. These contrasts reflect not only the different socio-political contexts (Europe/Latin America), but also partially different traditions of theoretical-political work and epistemic practices. There is, of course, room for mutual learning; for instance, might it be possible for PD/AD to gain greater resonance in the academy and for the creation of scholarly networks similar to those of DG? Conversely, can DG theorists emulate some of the Latin American epistemic practices, in which local knowledges and inputs are integral to the project, and where links to social movements is an important factor?¹⁴

There are points of convergence and disagreement at the level of actors and strategies. Both movements agree on the fact that markets and policy reform, by themselves, will not accomplish the transitions needed. Shared as well is a substantial questioning of capitalism and liberalism as arenas for advancing sustainable degrowth (SDG), PD or Buen Vivir; PD advocates share the overall sentiment that “a degrowth [and PD] society will need different

institutions” (Kallis et al. 2012, p. 174). DG considers a broad array of strategies and actors, from oppositional activism and the construction of alternative worlds to various types of reformism (Demaria et al. 2013).¹⁵ In other words, the question of the political subject of the transformation is explicitly articulated by DG, whereas it is perhaps too easily taken for granted by PD. On the converse side, elements of which the ICTA group is critical when considered in isolation but which are often associated with DG—such as voluntary simplicity, ‘Cinderella’ economies, efficiency, energy descent, population, and the redefinition of prosperity—are rarely considered, seen as inapplicable, or even ridiculed in the South (there are exceptions, such as the growing movement of *ecoaldeas* in Latin America, which involve dimensions of spirituality and frugality).¹⁶ The bias for the small and the place-based, under the banner of re-localization, is another feature bringing together DG and PD. An important concern for both schools of thought is the emphasis on local autonomy, which reveals a certain predilection for anarchism as political imaginary.¹⁷

Finally, DG and PD/AD confront overlapping challenges. To point at some of the main ones, on the PD/AD side the most clear challenge is the appropriation of Buen Vivir by the State in countries like Ecuador and Bolivia while continuing to pursue aggressive extractivist policies and, not infrequently, the repression of environmentalist and grassroots movements. Also noticeable is the trend for local communities to agree, under pressure, on conventional development operations with corporations, NGOs (e.g., for REDD projects), or the State. On the DG side, a main risk is the subversion of its meaning through ‘green economy’ and ‘post-growth’ schemes that leave untouched the basic architecture of economism. As DG advocates well

¹⁵ A recent study of alternative economic practices in Barcelona proposes an insightful typology of actors: those ‘culturally adapted’ to the status quo (what is called ‘business as usual’ in a number of scenarios, such as the GTI); ‘culturally transformative’ (radical innovators); and ‘alternative practitioners’ (in between). See Conill et al. (2012a, b).

¹⁶ Rather than voluntary simplicity, which has proven controversial, the notion of ‘conviviality’ preferred by the ICTA group seems to me more apt to convey the range of domains associated with DG (tools, commons, economies etc.). DG’s goal thus becomes “a transition to convivial societies who live simply, in common and with less” (Kallis et al. 2015: 11). This could buttress the critique of over-consumption among the Latin American middle classes, which has barely started. DG also deals with population, although somewhat obliquely, and often emphasizing the need to link population issues to feminist emancipatory politics.

¹⁷ However, the sources of the thought of autonomy are partially different in both cases, with Latin American perspectives having a more openly political orientation emphasizing communal logics, cultural difference, and non-liberal and non-State forms of social organization (Escobar 2014). Autonomy is another fruitful dialogue to be had between DG and PD, albeit beyond the scope of this chapter.

¹⁴ A more systematic comparison would have to include analysis of the respective genealogies, practices, goals, and strategies of DG and PD.

put it, DG is not about doing “less of the same” but about living with less and differently, about downscaling while fostering the flourishing of life in other terms (Kallis et al. 2015).

Emergent areas of work on postdevelopment in Latin America¹⁸

Latin America was an epicenter of critical perspectives in the 1960s and 1970, with dependency theory, liberation theology, participatory action research, and popular education and communications as salient areas of work. At the outset of the millennium, and after two ‘lost decades,’ it would seem the continent is emerging again as a space of counter-hegemonic thought. The last 10 years have seen a significant renovation of the debates (Gudynas and Acosta 2011; Porto et al. 2015). For Acosta, the present moment constitutes an opportunity to move along the path of postdevelopment (2010; 2012). For Maristella Svampa, environmental and social struggles around extractivism “have actualized a series of nodal debates that have characterized Latin American critical thought”, including development (2012, p. 25). This intellectual effervescence—reflected in multiple publications, volumes, meetings, and so forth, sometimes connected to acute ongoing socio-environmental struggles, reflected in names such as TIPNIS, Bagua, Conga, Yasuní, Santurbán, La Toma, and many others—is yielding important theoretical-political work in many of the region’s countries.

Svampa identifies three positions in the development field: neo-liberal developmentalism, progressive neodevelopmentalism, and the postdevelopment perspective; this latter reveals “a fracture in critical thought ... where postdevelopment positions agglutinate a diversity of currents with decolonizing ambitions, pointing at the dismantling and deactivation—through a series of categories and limit-concepts—of the apparatuses of power, myths and imaginaries that are at the basis of the current development model” (2012, p. 51). Similarly, for Gudynas and Acosta, “Buen Vivir represents an alternative to development; it constitutes one of the most substantial responses to postdevelopment” (2011, p. 78). While degrowth debates have not been taken up, the discussions DG are fostering are not without relevance for the Latin American contexts, and vice versa.

There are four additional areas that, while not explicitly articulated in terms of post/development, could be said to participate in the PD project, as they fulfill one of PD’s main criteria, namely to displace development from its

¹⁸ This identification of emergent areas could be somewhat idiosyncratic, that is, mediated by this author’s experience. They are explained at length in Escobar (2014).

centrality as organizing principle of social life. These areas are: decolonial thought; the discourse on the crisis of civilizational model; the social and solidarity economy framework; and what we will broadly refer to as ‘the communal’, ‘relational’, and ‘pluriversal’ perspectives. They are briefly described in the remainder of this section.

The decolonial perspective The modernity/coloniality, or decolonial thought, perspective has been under construction since the late 1990s.¹⁹ It is a compelling framework that has articulated a complex lexicon, proposing that eurocentrism is the knowledge form of the modern/colonial world system since 1492. This perspective develops a decided critique of modernity, proposing the need for epistemic decolonization as a crucial domain of struggle towards transmodernity or alternatives to modernity. In other words, decolonial thought aims to go beyond intra-European or intra-modern perspectives on modernity to establish other grounds for thought and action. As a new generation of decolonial authors enters into the picture, the perspective has been questioned and enriched by delving into new areas, such as nature (coloniality of nature), interculturality (e.g., Walsh 2009), and feminism (decolonial feminisms, e.g., Espinosa et al. 2013). The conceptual corpus created by the decolonial perspective has found echo among some social movements; some refer to PD and AD as ‘decolonial’ projects. Its critique of modernity has been useful to enrich PD perspectives, and it could afford insights for DG, within which the critical perspective on modernity remains undeveloped.

Crisis of civilizational model Summit after summit of indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant movements refer to the “crisis of the Western civilizational model” as the root cause of the global social, economic, and ecological crises, thus adumbrating a transition beyond such model, towards a different cultural and ecological paradigm. For some indigenous intellectuals, the “political offensive” of indigenous peoples is precisely oriented towards the creation of a “new civilizational project” (Mamani 2006). As Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, “there is a *debate civilizatorio* in the continent” (Santos 2010, p. 5; see also Lander 2010). Other movements, such as agroecological peasant movements and some women’s movements, echo this proposal (e.g., Via Campesina). There is emphasis on the plurality of models to be crafted and on the fact that what is at stake is not a transition from capitalism to socialism but something more complex. Indigenous, peasant,

¹⁹ Lander’s edited volume (2000) is the most cited collective work within this perspective. For a recent set of papers in English, see Mignolo and Escobar (2009), which includes a succinct presentation of the perspective (Escobar’s chapter). There is already a vast oeuvre stemming from this perspective—both collective and by individual authors—largely in Spanish, with some translations into other languages.

and Afrodescendant *cosmovisiones* are presented as particularly important sources for the debate on alternative civilizational models and to recover *el sentido de la vida* (the meaning of what life is). The discourse on change of civilizational model is yet to be developed more fully; it is referenced with some trepidation in PD/AD debates, and it makes occasional appearances in the DG literature as well. It is a rising activist transition discourse that merits further attention by PD and DG advocates.²⁰

La economía social y solidaria (ESS), or social and solidarity economy: This area is experiencing a blossoming in Latin America at present, and it is a ‘natural’ partner for degrowth. The ESS displaces capitalism from the center of economy, deconstructs capitalist economics, seeking to articulate “an economy where many economies can fit” (Coraggio 2008, p. 1; see also Hinkelammert and Mora 2009). It builds on the manifold forms of popular economy existing among communities, including cooperative, associational, mutualistic, autonomous (*autarquía*) reciprocal, redistributive, non-capitalist and alternative capitalist, and so forth. It redefines productivity and efficiency in holistic ways and articulates a radical critique of growth from this perspective. Inspired by Polanyi’s thought, it conceptualizes the forms in which the economy is, or could be, re-embedded in society by recreating economic systems on the basis of communal dynamics and needs. Explicitly offered by some as a strategy of transition “towards a new [socio-biocentric] civilization” (Acosta 2013, p. 22), the ESS calls for a change in consumption patterns, away from capitalistic consumption towards quality of life. In its feminist versions, the ESS re-conceptualizes social reproduction from a perspective of economies of care, pointing at the inevitable relation between the occupation of territories by capital (land grabbing) and the loss of women’s autonomy, including endemic forms of violence against them (e.g., Quiroga 2012; Quiroga and Gómez Correal 2013; Quiroga and Gago 2012).²¹ Care and the commons are two important bridge arenas between North and South; commons and ‘commoning,’ as much as ESS, purport to lay down the material and semiotic foundations for other possible worlds (Bollier 2014; Bollier and Helfrich 2012).

The communal, relationality, and the pluriverse This final area is made up of several interrelated lines of research centered on the resurgence of ‘the communal’ and the growing concern with relationality in some Latin American activist and academic circles. The emphasis on the communal is a response to the disconnection and

detritorialization created by State, liberal, and capitalist forms of organization. From this perspective, popular struggles stem from the long-standing place-based practices of many groups. Underlying these struggles there is an entirely different way of seeing and organizing socio-natural life, broadly referred to as communal or relational. The community is theorized as profoundly historical, heterogeneous, traversed by power, and engaged with markets and modernity, not in essentialized terms. Whether speaking of a ‘communal system’ in El Alto (Patzí 2004), *entramados comunitarios* (communal entanglements) in Bolivia or Mexico (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2012), indigenous communitarian feminisms (Paredes 2010), or indigenous-popular struggles based on autonomous territorial and political practices (e.g., Esteva 1997, 2005; Zibechi 2006; Mamani 2006; Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008), at stake is a view of struggles as oriented towards the constitution of non-liberal, non-state, and non-capitalist practices. A key question emerging from these interpretations is that of “*how to stabilize in time* a mode of regulation that is outside of, *against and beyond* the social order imposed by capitalism and the liberal State” (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008: 46).

The communal dimension is highlighted in Gustavo Esteva’s analyses of the autonomous struggles in Oaxaca and Chiapas. For this postdevelopment thinker, the resistance against the death project of capital and the State can only be understood by delving into the long-standing autonomous forms of government of the communities. At stake is a reorganization of society “on the basis of the strength of the *comunalidad* [the fact of being communal]... a way of being that constitutes the meaning of autonomous existence” (2012, p. 246), as it has been done in some of the Zapatista territories and in Oaxacan communities, or those of Colombia’s Nasa people, and in some Afrodescendant, women, and peasant struggles. As aymara feminist Julieta Paredes puts it, the point of departure in many of these struggles is “the community as the inclusive principle for the caring of life” (2010, p. 27). For us, moderns, this implies rethinking how we have been constituted as individuals, and re-conceptualizing the communal as a foundational principle for the new societies.

What underlies this possibility is an entire dimension that is usually understood as ‘cultural’ but that could be more properly described as ‘ontological’ (Escobar 2014). Briefly, communal worlds are relational worlds, defined as those worlds in which nothing pre-exists the relations that constitute it (reality is relational through and through), as opposed to the dualist ontologies that predominate in modern worlds, where entities are seen as existing on their own (the ‘individual’, ‘nature’, ‘the world’), prior to their inter-relations. Anthropologists explain relational worlds as those in which there is continuity between the biophysical,

²⁰ A recent volume bridges ‘crisis of civilization’ and critiques of development from decolonial perspectives (Quintero 2014).

²¹ This is a very inadequate statement about the ESS field. See the useful ESS dictionary (Coraggio et al. 2013), and special issues of *Iconos* (Quito, No. 33, 2009), and *América Latina en Movimiento* (No. 482, 2013).

the human, and the supernatural worlds, rather than a strict separation between them. Dualist ontologies, on the contrary, have given rise to the idea that we all live in a single reality and world—a ‘One-World world’ (OWW) or ‘Euro-American metaphysics’ (Law 2011) exported to many world regions through colonialism, development, and globalization. The OWW is based on a number of constitutive dualisms, such as nature/culture or humans/non-humans; mind/body; and so forth. Displacing the centrality of this ontology, while broadening the space for other ontologies, is a *sine qua non* for breaking away from the one-world story. Many transition discourses reflect this notion in one way or another. The imply transitions to the pluriverse.

There are many signs that suggest that the One-World doctrine is unraveling. The growing struggles to defend mountains, landscapes, forests, territories and so forth by appealing to a relational understanding of life is another manifestation of the OWW’s crisis. From this perspective, globalization can be described as a *mono-ontological occupation* of the planet by the OWW. The ‘pluriverse’ is a way of looking at reality that contrasts with the OWW assumption that there is a single reality to which there correspond multiple cultures or subjective representations; it amounts to “a world where many worlds fit”, as the Zapatista wisely puts it.

An important dimension of any transition discourse, including PD and DG, should thus be moving from a view of globalization as the universalization of modernity to a view of globality as the struggle to preserve and foster the pluriverse. To the ontological occupation of the territories by globalized capitalism and the OW ontology, many movements are responding with territorial struggles that amount to a *political activation of relationality*. Environmental conflicts are often ontological struggles, that is, the involve contests over the basic definition of life and the world. This political ontology interpretation could be useful to DG as it continues to enrich its radical imagination.²²

Conclusion

As one of the most lucid and persistent critics of development put it in his most recent analysis of the concept, despite failures, development continues to be “at the center of a powerful but fragile semantic constellation”. (Esteva et al. 2013, p. 1). So with growth, progress, markets, and the economy. If the consolidation of these constructs

involved a veritable civilizational development, their theoretical and practical denaturalization similarly demands important civilizational rearrangements. Transition discourses, including degrowth and postdevelopment, intuit compelling and viable paths in this direction. Thinking from the perspective of the Earth as a whole, in the last instance, suggests that divisions between ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ (another modern binary), and hence between ‘degrowth’ and ‘postdevelopment,’ will tend to dissolve as pluriversal perspectives asserts themselves.

There are additional connections between DG and PD; for instance, arguments about the communal and the relational should be useful to enrich debates in the degrowth field concerning the extent to which the transition to a degrowth society can be accomplished within, or through, capitalism and liberalism. The current thrust in Latin America is that while engaging by necessity with capitalism, modernity, and the State, the struggles for transformation have to be conducted on the basis of an entirely different logic of socio-natural life, indexed provisionally as non-liberal, non-capitalist, communal, and relational. The emphasis on the re-invention of communities is a powerful argument to deal with the amazingly pervasive practices keeping ‘the individual’ (anchored in markets and consumption) in place as the pillar of society and for imaging alternative regimes of relational personhood, in which personhood is also redefined within the *tejido* (weave) of life always being created with non-humans. Similarly, from the concept of the pluriverse one can raise questions about the re-constitution of the plurality of European worlds, away from the dominant version of Euro-modernity, and envision perhaps “degrowing into a pluriverse” as part of sustainable degrowth, beyond the OWW structured by capitalism, liberalism, secularism, and the State. The centrality of questions about autonomy in Latin American debates could buttress DG arguments about the importance of re-thinking democracy from this perspective (Asara et al. 2013).²³

World-wide, the economic globalized civilization has taken on a tremendous force, seemingly relegating critical debates over growth and ‘development’ to the back burner; internationally, these debates are domesticated within the discourses of the millennium development goals (MDGs) and the post-2015 ‘sustainable development goals’. However, global movements continue to keep radical conversations alive, connecting development debates to questions

²² This section on relationality and the pluriverse is based on current work by Mario Blaser, Marisol de la Cadena, and the author of this paper. The perspective is broadly defined as political ontology. See, e.g., Blaser (2010, 2013), de la Cadena (2010) and Escobar (2014).

²³ I believe there are synergies to be drawn between Castoriadis’ notion of autonomy, which has been important in some DG perspectives (Asara et al. 2013; Latouche 2009), self-organization, and Latin American approaches to autonomy. Works on autonomy by Esteva, Zibechi, and Gutiérrez Aguilar and by movements such as Zapatismo and the Nasa struggle in Colombia’s south west (see <http://www.nasaacin.org/>) should be particularly useful.

of epistemic decolonization, social and environmental justice, the defense of cultural difference, and transition to postcapitalist, postgrowth, and non-anthropocentric societies. For most of these movements, it is clear that conventional development, in any of its forms—including ‘sustainable’—is no longer an option. In this context, the degrowth and PD/AD discussions are a beacon of hope. At least for many social movements and for transition advocates, whatever form ‘development’ or alternatives to development take will have to involve more radical questionings of growth, extractivism, and even modernity than ever before.

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