

K McAfee short abstract for Leipzig 2014 degrowth conference

Green economy and its others: conservation, scarcity, and buen vivir

Green economy aims to save globalized capitalism from economic crisis by muting its ecologically and socially destructive consequences and surmounting conflicts rooted in worsening global inequalities. Its advocates endorse markets in nature as both a conservation strategy and a means to revive economic growth in a context of perceived resource shortages and scarce ecological space. Some global-South governments have denounced green economy and commodification of nature as unjust and unsustainable but their commitment to extraction-based growth catches them in contradictions. In contrast, emerging critiques from the left and from ‘below’ challenge the foundational assumptions of mainstream green economy and the growth imperative at its core. Movements inspired by *buen vivir*, *sumak kawsay*, *lek’il kuxlejal*, etc. pursue endogenous strategies aimed at reduced dependence on external markets and capital, repeasantization, and equitable urban-rural relationships. They reject the construction of ecological limits as absolute scarcity, focusing less on the finitude of resources and carbon sinks than on the anti-entropic, life-giving relationship among human labor, water, soil, sun, and the activities of other species.

K McAfee long abstract for Leipzig 2014 degrowth conference

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Green-economy advocates endorse markets in environmental assets and deficits both as a way to foster conservation and a means to revive economic growth (e.g., UNEP 2011; World Bank 2012). In this way, green economy aims to save globalized capitalism from its ongoing economic crisis while muting its ecologically and socially destructive consequences. But emerging critiques from the left and ‘from below’ challenge the foundational assumptions of mainstream green economy and the growth imperative on which it depends.

In green-economy discourse, growth is seen as vital to sustainability because it generates both profits that can finance investments in greener production and public and private revenues to pay for conservation. Earnings from growth could also reimburse those who must forgo the use of natural resources and so-called ecosystem services, especially carbon sequestration, because they are now needed by ‘global society’. Many proponents of green economy, troubled by persistent ‘underdevelopment’ and the potential of markets to further ‘marginalize’ the poor, stress the obligations of polluters and over-consumers to pay compensation to and ask for ‘informed consent’ from those whose resource access must now be limited.

These poverty-sensitive versions of green economy are no less wedded to the exigency of growth and definitions of development that depend upon growth. The environmental-economic model that undergirds most green-economy thinking is based on neoclassical economics, in which economic growth entails increased consumption and consumption is

the ultimate purpose of economic activity. This circle of presumptions, which has long framed most trade and development policy, has also come to hold sway in international environmental policymaking.

Compared to the post-WWII boom, economic growth has been erratic or stagnant in much of the world since the 1980s and more so since 2007. Even where growth has been rapid, it has typically been accompanied by increased inequality and has failed to deliver the shared development benefits promised by liberal theories of free trade and comparative advantage. In this context, activist social movements in the global South and North – and, for the first time in decades, some governments – are questioning whether ‘sustainable development’ can be achieved within the framework of unfettered capitalism and so-called free trade. Continued commitment to the goal of growth, however, catches many of these actors in contradictions.

Criticism of market-driven development has been expressed openly in recent environmental negotiations. At the 2012 Rio+20 Earth Summit, G77 negotiators revived the argument that global-South countries are owed compensation for damages suffered under colonialism, echoing calls for a New International Economic Order from the 1960s-70s. The concepts of ecological debt and unequal ecological exchange bring new dimensions to these demands and bolster the embattled principles of common but differentiated responsibility (CDR) and Special and Differential Treatment of would-be developing countries. These principles implicitly recognize the ongoing structural asymmetries of power and wealth. They were emphasized at the first Earth Summit and reaffirmed in weaker terms at Rio+20 but have come under attack, especially by the US.

Today, issues of global inequality arise more explicitly in environmental debates and negotiations than in trade and development finance talks. These issues are brought to a head by the specter of worsening ecological scarcity that haunts contemporary environmentalism. Capitalist trade and development policy has been built on the notion that all participants in market exchange necessarily benefit, even if some gain much more than others. In contrast, environmental discourse has been deeply influenced by fears of resource shortages and population excesses, especially since the 1960s. Concepts common in environmental policy conversation in the Anglophone global North: ‘tragedy of the commons’, ‘lifeboat ethics’, ‘carrying capacity’, and the I=PAT formula, as well as ‘peak oil’, ‘peak water’, etc., hold a notion of absolute scarcity at their core.

The idea that humanity as a whole faces tradeoffs dictated by biophysical realities underlies green-economy thinking. The expectations of imminent resource shortages and inadequate ‘ecological space’ imply a need for enforceable limits on development. This sharpens the questions: Who, where, will be required to sacrifice? Who, if anyone, deserves compensation? The task for green-economy policy, then, is to surmount the resulting growth-versus-development tension.

To this end, green economy requires that the exchange values of so-called natural capital and the costs of environmental damages be determined by expert estimates or, preferably for some, be ‘discovered’ through the workings of supply and demand. Once their market

values become known, then environmental externalities – unintentional costs or benefits of economic activities – can supposedly be internalized into the accounting of individuals, enterprises and states. Environmental policy can thus circumvent the austerity policies, conflicts of interest, and disputes about global inequities that have stymied international action on climate-change mitigation and biodiversity conservation.

Proponents hope that markets can thus supersede environmental politics. ‘Ideological’ discussion of how scarcities have been created, whose interests are served by them, and whether market-based management of nature is even possible, become mere distractions from the imperative of averting climate catastrophe. The treatment of ‘humanity’ as an undifferentiated whole obscures the facts that some people and places suffer directly from ecological degradation while others benefit immensely from it. Meanwhile, most green-economy advocates take for granted that radical redistribution of wealth and resource access is politically impossible and that Western-style ‘development’ is both desirable and universally desired.

Paradoxically, governments of countries that have been materially degraded by globalized growth, even some of those that use anti-capitalist rhetoric, are calling for more growth. At Rio+20 Earth Summit, members of the ALBA alliance of Latin American and Caribbean governments sharply condemned neoliberalism, ‘green economy’, ‘commodification of nature’, and market-based conservation schemes such as carbon trading and REDD+ on grounds that markets in nature impoverish people and ecosystems. Just as forcefully, however, the same governments rejected calls at Rio+20 for reduced production of fossil fuels. They pursue extractivist policies at the expense of people and nature within their borders, arguing that limits on such activities would worsen poverty by stifling economic growth.

The implicit equations of development with growth, well-being with consumption, and conservation with market rationality are being challenged by rural-based social movements and their intellectual allies. Instead of growth they speak of *buen vivir*, *sumak kawsay*, *lek’il kuxlejal*, radical ecological democracy, etc. These concepts connote living well and living cooperatively both socially and ecologically. These visionaries do not exclude trade, much less the reduction of material deprivation, but they reject narrow productivism that is blind to ecological consequences and distributive outcomes. Instead, they pursue endogenous strategies aimed at reduced dependence on external markets and capital, re-peasantization, and equitable urban-rural relationships.

Many of these movements draw on indigenous and peasant cosmologies at odds with the conceptual bifurcation of nature and society, competitive individualism, and instrumental rationality that are central to market-based conservation. In place of standardized scientific categories and universally commensurable values they are informed by relational ontologies: understandings of human-nature linkages that are diverse, dynamic and specific to particular territories, times, and ecosocial systems. Can such visions and strategies overcome the apparent conflict between the need for greater material well-being and the impoverishing, diversity-destroying results of globalized growth?

One promising sign is the vitality of peasant movements for food sovereignty and cultural and economic autonomy led by affiliates La Via Campesina, the Zapatista *caracoles*, and other rural-based organizations on four continents. In the context of intensified international competition for land and natural resources – land grabbing and green grabbing – these movements attempt to defend or regain peasant and indigenous territories, reframing them conceptually while working to reconstruct them materially. Agroecology serves both as a source of principles for material practice and as a social process of political empowerment, horizontal learning, and *diálogos de saberes*, with tangible successes in many places. For these movements, biodiversity conservation and climate-change mitigation, rather than being obstacles to development, are integral aspects of ecosocial survival and wholistic prosperity.

Instead of a world of shortages they assume a world of sufficiency. Concepts such as *buen vivir* – as used by these movements, not necessarily by governments – convey plentitude, even while recognizing the existence of biophysical limits to *how* people, communities, and countries can develop themselves. They connotes values and measures of well-being that are material as well as social but that cannot be reduced to monetary prices and may not be quantifiable or commensurable across places and cultures. *Buen vivir* rejects the construction of ecological limits as absolute scarcity, focusing less on the finitude of resources and carbon sinks than on the anti-entropic, life-giving relationship between human labor, water, soil, sun, and the activities of other species.

The limits and contradictions of the market panacea for conservation and development are increasingly acknowledged. Counter-discourses to green economy challenge the conventional consensus that economic growth, green or otherwise, is the *sine qua non* of human progress, widening the cracks in long-hegemonic ideologies and creating a discursive space in which alternate possibilities become imaginable. The far-reaching criticisms of the green-economy paradigm reflect the ways that ‘environmental’ concerns have become more openly political and central to the challenges facing both those who seek to save capitalism and those who desire alternatives or are already living them.

Works cited

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