

Abstract submission for:

Short paper at the Fourth International Conference on Degrowth

Title: Re-imagining reality and the making of post-growth worlds

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Narrative step: Visions and strategies for transformation

Abstract:

Transformations in worldviews and ways of being can be seen as qualitative changes in the rules and visions that guide the underlying cultural assumptions, metaphors and narratives that structure relations between humans and their environment. Thus, finding ways of being and thinking that embody 'post-growth' living entails attending to the way human-nature relationships are envisioned and enacted. Seeing social change as a process of constellating and enacting alternate realities, a transformation in ways of seeing and being involves a qualitative change in how the world is experienced and known. This implies a shift in the meanings that shape the lifeworld. Investigating the role of cultural metaphors and myths in assigning meaning and focussing attention within the lifeworld, it is argued that acknowledging the cultural myths that shape and define our relationships presents a possibility for transformations in worldviews through engaging with the meanings that underpin social relations.

The discussion of changes in worldview and ways of being is contextualised by empirical examples of envisioning and embodying alternate realities drawn from an in-depth case study of The Dark Mountain Project, a cultural movement which sees the contemporary sustainability challenge as one of 'uncivilising' ways of thinking and being. By establishing an alternative narrative framing of current social-ecological crises and thereby creating a space for conversations based on fundamentally different premises to those of mainstream debates about sustainability, the Dark Mountain Project has attracted a large number of participants who engage in a questioning of the progressive cultural narrative. Participation in creative practices, dialogues, gatherings and conversations about wider issues related to the process of 'uncivilising' allow for mutual sense-making to grow within a supportive community of inquiry and engaging with alternative ways of seeing and making sense of the world. In this process new understandings and relationships emerge which point beyond the parameters of the social relationships implied by progressive worldviews.

It is shown that the imagination plays a crucial role in enacting new forms of human-nature relationships as this is where a first shift in the relations which constitute the lifeworld takes place. But the processes of changing worldviews and ways of being challenge the rationalities and values which earlier made sense of the lifeworld and this experience can be disconcerting and disruptive of deeper life narratives. Transformation of worldviews is not a linear process which simply follows from specific visions and strategies, it is a non-linear, recursive, ambiguous and perplexing journey through questioning the narratives, metaphors and logics of dominant ways of seeing. And because changes in a way of seeing have to be embodied by actually perceiving and relating differently to the world, it is infeasible to change one's worldview solely by determination or will – shifts in framings and metaphors are partly unconscious and uncontrollable. Consequently, it is argued that

developing transformative visions and practices for a post-growth world needs to engage with the practical processes in which human-nature relationships are imagined and embodied.

Stepping outside the view of Progress entails a redefinition of the aims and values which drive social and economic ambitions. It means conceiving of wealth and the good life in different terms, and accepting that the material prosperity based on cheap and readily available fossil fuels cannot continue indefinitely. While Western societies may become poorer in this sense but that does not necessarily mean a lower quality of life. Exploring, and gradually beginning to embody, other ways of seeing and living through stories that express non-progressive metaphors and narratives, is a way to engage with the cultural change that is necessary for realising such re-conceptualisations. Building a cultural narrative that counters the old expectations of progress while allowing for the gradual emergence of new realities is a process which requires that requires the same attention, care and practice it takes to master a new instrument and it involves moving back and forth between new insights and unresolved questions. As a complex process which involves several stages of breakdown of meaning, disillusionment and mourning for lost hopes and dreams, changing worldview does not 'end' in resolution but is part of a continual process of becoming.