

How far is Degrowth a Really Revolutionary Counter Movement to Neoliberalism?

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Abstract

Capitalism is often modernised and stabilised by its very critics. Gramsci called this paradox a “passive revolution”. What are the pitfalls through which critique becomes absorbed? This question is taken up using a Cultural Political Economy approach for analysing the resistant potential of “degrowth discourses” against the neoliberal hegemony. Degrowth advocates an economy without growth in order to achieve the transformation that is necessary in ecological and social terms. It thus does not follow the neoliberal idea of Green capitalism that already has absorbed much environmental critique. This paper argues that degrowth needs to be further differentiated in order to draw any conclusions about its counter-hegemonic potential. Three dimensions are identified for differentiating sub-hegemonic from counter-hegemonic degrowth positions: the mode of growth critique, the interpellation of the individual and the subsequent actions motivated.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, social ecological crisis, hegemony, passive revolution, degrowth

Introduction

The world has lately experienced an evolving multidimensional crisis reaching from democratic to financial to environmental problems (Demirović et al. 2011). Neoliberalism has been identified by many as both cause of and solution to the crisis (e.g. Mirowski 2013). Neoliberalism refers to a specific capitalist formation of society that has grown, since the 1970s, to become established worldwide. Structurally, neoliberalism is characterised by a globalised, increasingly financialised market economy in combination with various processes of deregulation and privatisation, as well as an intensive commodification pervading all spheres of life (Ptak 2017: 76f.). This is linked to the pressure to expand the scale of the economy which is indispensable for the capitalist system to function. From a discursive point of view it is characterised by individualising tendencies, the ideas of self-management and self-optimisation, as well as the belief in market economies as a necessity with no alternatives (Lessenich 2003: 86; Bröckling 2007: 283). While appearing in different forms over time and space, this core set of interdependent structural and discursive features has proven extraordinarily resilient and adaptable.

According to a popular argument within critical social science, capitalism owes its modernisation and legitimisation to the successful incorporation of critique and resistance directed against it (van Dyk 2010; Boltanski and Chiapello 2006; Bröckling 2007). Hence, critical discourses serve as motors of innovation for the capitalist system. This seems to be a fairly paradoxical diagnosis, albeit not a genuinely new one. Gramsci describes this phenomenon as early as in the 1930s. He calls the absorption of critical positions and rebellions by the ruling system a *passive revolution* (Gramsci 1991-2002: PN8, §25:252)¹.

¹ While there are different readings of the concept of ‘passive revolution’, I follow the understanding of Sum and Jessop and others: “‘Passive revolution’ is a term used by Gramsci [...] to examine the ways in which a social class maintains its hegemony through gradual, molecular changes that operate through passive consent, the decapitation of resistance movements, and absorption of opposition through compromise and concession” (Sum

Despite the dominance of neoliberal crisis management, various alternative discourses and approaches have emerged (Sum and Jessop 2013: 425). In this paper I will explore one such alternative in the form of the “degrowth” movement’s discourse. Relating to the Gramscian argument, I will analyse if degrowth offers a form of critique that manages to escape appropriation by capitalism in general, and neoliberalism in particular, or if it rather contributes to their modernisation due to an intrinsic connectivity.

The analysis is informed by the neo-Gramscian approach of Cultural Political Economy (CPE), which “is concerned with the semiotic and structural aspects of social life and, even more importantly, their articulation” (Sum and Jessop 2013: 1). CPE, as put forward by Sum and Jessop (2013), combines concepts from neo-Marxist approaches, such as regulation theory and materialist state theory, with critical discourse analysis and a Foucauldian terminology. CPE is based on a critical realist depth ontology, i.e. the idea that there is a materially existing reality that is yet so complex that complexity reduction is needed in order to understand it and to become capable of acting within it (ibid.: 3; 26). Complexity reduction takes place through two interdependent forms of selection: semiosis and structuration. Semiosis refers to the social production of intersubjective meaning. That is, for example, our perception of how crises should be relieved. Structuration describes structurally inscribed asymmetries, which can be understood as how an actor’s social position (e.g., finance minister, member of a non-governmental organisation) affects the potency of their actions. Semiosis and structuration have both discursive as well as non-discursive elements. While CPE offers various methodological entry points, my focus will be discursive because I define “degrowth” as a potentially action guiding discourse, i.e. as an imaginary that is not yet institutionalised. Possible effects on structures as well as the structural embedding of the discourse are added to the account given as necessary and possible.

and Jessop 2013: 412; Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn 1982; Cox 1983; Hauf 2016; Mouffe 1979; Wanner 2015)).

The paper starts by defining neoliberalism as a hegemonic economic imaginary and defending this claim against possible objections. In doing so, I present a short overview of the current debate on economic growth and the social ecological crisis, and show how this debate has been dominated by neoliberal crisis management. Next I introduce degrowth as an alternative economic imaginary and demonstrate the extent to which it has produced a distinct interpretation of the crisis. Two different strands of the degrowth discourse are selected based on an empirical analysis of the European degrowth movement (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2015, 2016, 2018). The ensuing analysis is theory-guided and supplemented with texts from prominent degrowth proponents. The contention is that, the predominance of specific discursive strands will determine whether the emerging degrowth movement is more likely to become a counter-hegemonic project *or* serve as a passive revolution within neoliberalism. The anchoring of degrowth discourse in different growth critiques, and the related modes for interpellation of the individual,² are argued to be the decisive distinguishing criteria regarding the transformative potential of an emerging movement.

Neoliberal hegemony revisited

Whether neoliberalism can be defined as a hegemonic societal formation or not is highly disputed in the literature (Brand and Wissen 2017; Candeias 2004; Demirović 2008; Hirsch 2005; Plehwe 2016). Hegemony in a Gramscian sense refers to the cultural-ethical leadership of a particular class, which successfully universalises its own interest and, with that, can organise the consensus of subordinated classes (Gramsci 1991-2002: PN12, §1:1502). Hegemony is mainly produced in civil society which either upholds a temporally normalised and consolidated leadership or refers to a contested terrain in which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic imaginaries encounter each other (Sum 2005: 15).

² “Interpellation“ is a term introduced by Louis Althusser, that describes the mechanism by which an individual becomes subject to an ideology in a double sense: by subordination as a subject and by the constitution of its subjectivity. This mechanism guarantees the reproduction of existing social relations ((Althusser 1971)).

While Demirović (2008) firmly rejects the notion of neoliberal hegemony, his argument is countered by the proposition that neoliberalism's hegemonic character can be clearly derived from its discursive superiority as an economic imaginary. Demirović argues that neoliberalism is lacking the decisive consensual elements – the dominant classes do not strive for compromise and concessions (ibid.: 19). Neoliberalism is rather characterised by a reckless pursuit of interests and the termination of the Fordist class-compromise (ibid.: 18, 23). While this argument is powerful in terms of material aspects of hegemony, it is unconvincing in discursive terms. Instead two different types of, or perspectives on, hegemony can be distinguished: *hegemony in production* and *production of hegemony*.³ The former analyses material conditions of hegemony, while the latter is much more interested in hegemony's production by discourses and 'knowledging technologies' (Sum and Jessop 2013: 216), i.e. the socially constructed, power-entangled problematisation of certain issues. Material hegemonies organise consensus by granting economic concessions to subaltern groups (e.g. high wage payments)⁴. Discursive hegemonies are characterised by the production of a uniform worldview by which power relations can be legitimised. They will be approved by subaltern groups despite the lack of economic concessions. Of course, this is not a strict separation since hegemony always entails both elements. Thus, while Demirović, and others, concentrate solely on the material features of neoliberalism, and therefore deny its hegemonic status, they fail to account for its discursive properties. Indeed, the discursive superiority of the neoliberal worldview can account for its successful organisation of consensus in society as a whole and this justifies speaking of neoliberalism as a discursive hegemony.

³ I borrowed the terms from Sum and Jessop but use it in a new context here (Sum/Jessop, 2013: 198ff.).

⁴ Subaltern refers to all groups or classes that are not part of the ruling class or their allies.

The neoliberal discourse is characterised by an accumulation of values and ‘subjectivations’,⁵ focussing on individual freedom. Although, this freedom is linked to the principle of self-responsibility: Everybody has the freedom but also the responsibility to make something out of his/her life (Lessenich 2003: 86). Emergencies, throwbacks, inequalities, and so on, are regarded as mostly self-inflicted and therefore require no compensation by society. The individual is being addressed as an entrepreneurial self (Bröckling 2007). Entrepreneurial principles - utility maximization, (self-)optimisation, commodification (of needs), or efficiency enhancement - generate a maelstrom for individual behaviour and self-perception (ibid.: 283). Entrepreneurship and merit are closely linked to each other.

Following Foucault’s concept of *dispositif*,⁶ the neoliberal society can be regarded as profoundly shaped by the presence of a so-called “merit-dispositif” which is a net of discourses and discursive practices that define merit as a success principle within a market economic society. The idea of meritocracy is deeply anchored in the moral values of neoliberal societies (Bücker 2016: 113ff.). The efficacy of this *dispositif* is not limited to the labour market but also relates to the self-perception of the individual in general. The individual as “human resource” has to be attractive for investments (ibid.: 106), no matter whether this concerns its labour force, its sexuality or its fitness. Individuals, as neoliberal subjects, try to self-optimize by means of various techniques of self-management (e.g. diets, gym membership, creative classes), in order to minimise risks and increase personal utility. The progressive economisation of all areas of life, that is “a growing influence of the economy on societal mindsets and actions” (Höhne 2015: 3, my translation), penetrates individual’s self-perception and becomes reproduced by individual behaviour. This *dispositif*

⁵ In poststructural theory, subjectivation denotes both the becoming of a subject by being allocated a position within the order of a specific system, and the active definition of the subjects’ position by the individual themselves ((e.g. Foucault 1994)).

⁶ Foucault defines a *dispositif* as: “[...] a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions - in short, the said as much as the unsaid” ((Gordon 1980: 194ff.)).

is supported by the discourse of lacking alternatives. The latter presents the advancing commodification and the idea of meritocracy as status quo, which cannot be influenced but is controlled by economic necessities (Maiolino 2014: 290ff.; Peck and Tickell 2002: 391). The merit-dispositif casts its net over economic, political, educational, medial and private institutions; it penetrates the whole of society.

Applying an analytical concept from CPE, I define neoliberalism as a hegemonic economic imaginary. An (economic) imaginary is “a semiotic ensemble (or meaning system) without tightly defined boundaries that frames individual subjects’ lived experiences of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world” (Sum and Jessop 2013: 165). On the one hand, social actors need imaginaries to comprehend the economy in an intelligible way and to become capable of acting. On the other hand, imaginaries can contribute to the reproduction of domination. The reason why only certain imaginaries are selected and institutionalised, is explained by the evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection, and retention (ibid.: 165ff.). There is always a variety of contrary or overlapping construals of economic relations that classify, interpret and rate them in different ways. However, only a few are selected and become constitutive for societal constructions. Selection is more likely if an imaginary is compatible with a prevailing worldview, if it is represented by powerful actors, or if it has an appropriate infrastructure at its disposal. Retention is reached when an imaginary is successfully institutionalised in rules, routines, laws, identities, and strategies (ibid.: 185). Neoliberalism then can be regarded as an economic imaginary that has not only reached the stage of retention but has become hegemonic, i.e. rule stabilising.

While Demirović focuses on the lack of compromise and economic concessions, and therefore attributes neoliberalism with the inability to become hegemonic, he neglects the establishment of a hegemonic worldview that manages to gain interpretive predominance. In

contrast, neoliberal hegemony can be seen as a product of unconscious mechanisms of normalisation and processes of ‘subjectivation’ within the merit-dispositif, thus being independent of active consent towards power relations that are valued as beneficial. Nevertheless, the discursive features of hegemony are directly linked to and embedded in its structural components. Neoliberal discourses would be much less vigorous and resilient if they were not institutionalised. Only a materialisation in laws, institutional arrangements and/or social networks leads to structural constellations that make the reproduction of neoliberal phenomena more likely than the production of their alternatives.

Neoliberal crisis management

The case of the social ecological crisis illustratively shows how neoliberalism grants, (especially) discursive, concessions to its critics and includes their interests in order to mitigate crisis tendencies. However, this is undertaken in an adapted and reinterpreted fashion. This is how the subaltern struggles of the environmental movement have been absorbed and transformed into the concept of a ‘Green’ capitalism. While the focus here is on the absorbing powers of such a Green capitalism, neoliberalism still widely relies on ‘brown’ (fossil fuel, industrially polluting) business as usual scenarios.

Critiques of growth are not a new phenomenon. Economic growth and its social ecological consequences have been debated since the 19th century, culminating in the 1960s and 1970s debate on limits to growth (Meadows et al. 1972; Martinez-Alier 1990; Spash 1999). Since then, the number of publications on that issue has been ever increasing. Nevertheless, the ideas of wealth and economic growth are usually still closely linked. A world without economic growth seems to be inconceivable; the capitalist economic system has no alternative. In light of the escalating social ecological crisis, a new debate about the transformation of growth has arisen over the last ten years (Brand 2016: 290). The starting point of this very controversial debate is the idea that economic growth is not the answer to

every problem and should not be dealt with in an isolated way. However, there still appears to be general agreement in the public debate that further growth is desirable and even necessary (e.g. Deutscher Bundestag 2013: 24). Accordingly, different types of growth should be distinguished and include: ecological modernisation, Green growth, bioeconomy, sustainable development, knowledge economy, new climate economy. All share the commitment to increasing the scale of the economy but with some qualitative differences over traditional economic growth. There is a broad range of strategy papers and scientific publications elaborating the multifaceted meaning of such “sustainable growth” (e.g. Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2011; European Union 2018). A common consensus amongst growth advocates seems to include several positions, such as that economic growth and resource use can be decoupled; Green technologies, market mechanisms, commodification of ecosystem services will solve the environmental crisis; neoliberal ideas of rationality and efficiency are in tune with the ideals of nature protection and conservation (Bemmann, Metzger, and von Detten 2014: 7).

This typically neoliberal management approach to the social ecological crisis is a prime example for Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution (Wanner 2015). Passive revolutions serve as modernisations of hegemonic relations by absorbing external critique, transforming it, and hence stabilising existing power relations. Typical for the neoliberal management of the social ecological crisis has been its one-dimensional processing of crisis phenomena and the successful attempt to frame the crisis as being one *within* and not one *of* the system (Sum and Jessop 2013: 430). Processing the social ecological crisis as “environmental or climate crisis” avoids revealing complex interdependencies and connections to other crisis phenomena, such as the financial and democratic crises (Demirović et al. 2011: 14ff.). This rather narrow crisis interpretation has allowed system stabilising solutions which silence more critical alternatives (Sum and Jessop 2013: 424).

When the critique from the environmental movement gained growing acceptance in society, it also expanded into the hegemonic discourse of the media, science and politics (Candeias 2004: 325). However, the emphasis changed along with that broader acceptance: While the position of social/environmental movements had originally been quite critical of capitalism and offered alternative visions for society, the critique was increasingly adapted to political and economic programmes advocating solutions that were compatible with growth and the modern market economy (ibid.: 329). The neoliberal interpretation of the crisis led to a consolidation of capitalist appropriation and transformation of nature (Brunnengräber and Dietz 2011: 97, 105). Despite critical discussions of the notion of growth (Brand 2016: 290), the various forms of sustainable growth have avoided challenging the necessity of economic growth itself. Economic growth is merely supplemented by further factors of prosperity (e.g. education, health) and allegedly disconnected from the use of resources.

In this context, an *efficiency revolution* describes the possibility of reaching a sustainable level of energy and resource use by technical innovation (Santarius 2016: 51). Such crisis management is highly compatible with the prevailing economic discourses about maximising output by minimising input (von Winterfeld 2016: 283). It is also easily connected to the idea of meritocracy. In accordance with the pursuit of self-optimisation by the individual, larger-scale crises are also accepted as being controllable by merit and innovation. This ‘solution’ is part of a package including the decoupling of economic growth, better use of resources by technological revolution, tax incentives, the pricing of ‘externalities’, and valorisation, i.e. pricing, of ecological services (Candeias 2004: 329). Ecological crises are an opportunity for growth and can be responded to by commodifying natural resources, such as occurs with carbon emissions trading, because they open up further areas for accumulation.

Alternative visions, having partly started as external critique of capitalist appropriation of nature, have now entered the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism, serving its legitimisation.

Neoliberal strategies of Green capitalism seem to be the only feasible way out of the crisis, because they are compatible with prevailing imaginaries and structures. The integration of oppositional actors within the system fosters further legitimation. For example, environmental NGOs that receive a say in various political arenas become integrated in the system, and hence reproduce its structural selectivities, despite disagreement (ibid. 327). They play by the rules instead of proposing different ones. Hegemony is being reproduced through internal reform, disarticulation of oppositional politics, and eventually the regaining of consensus. In contrast, discourses that conceive of the social ecological crisis within a wider context become marginalised. CPE identifies these temporary crisis solutions as “spatio-temporal fixes” that “only appear to harmonize contradictions, which persist in one or another form” (Sum and Jessop 2013: 247). In that sense, any crisis solution also entails the potential for resistance against the prevailing hegemonic relations.

Degrowth as an alternative economic imaginary

In line with CPE and its concepts, the field of discourse around the notion of degrowth seems to meet important criteria that would constitute an alternative economic imaginary offering a different way out of the crisis than offered by neoliberal crisis management. However, further distinctions are required in order to draw out conclusions about its counter-hegemonic potential. Indeed the thesis presented here is that degrowth contains both sub-hegemonic and counter-hegemonic strands.

Sub-hegemony refers to discourses and practices that seem to differ from their hegemonic counterparts, but are in fact stabilising “flanking mechanisms” securing the hegemony and are compatible with it (Sum 2005: 17). Using the example of neoliberalism, “flanking [...] refer[s] to policies that seek to shore up neo-liberalism in the face of its contradictions. [...] This might involve palliative measures to contain the opposition of those excluded by neo-liberalism” (Graefe 2007: 97). Particularly interesting are discourses that are not core to the production of

neoliberal hegemony but nevertheless serve as flanking mechanisms - sometimes even contrary to their self-representation. It is possible that meanings become nuanced or widened and that norms are modified through sub-hegemonic adaptation. Although this only happens to the extent that keeps them compatible with the hegemonic discourse and open for absorption in order to secure the persistence of the hegemony. Sum's (2005) notion of sub-hegemony shows many parallels to Gramsci's concept of *passive revolution*. However, there are differences concerning the degree of strategic agency by the ruling groups in both concepts: While sub-hegemonic effects do not have to be willed, passive revolution involves strategic intentional action. Consequently, sub-hegemonic discourses can backup the undertaking of a passive revolution.

Counter-hegemonic discourses challenge the hegemonic formation in a way that cannot be reinterpreted and therefore made available for modernising and strengthening the hegemony (Sum 2005: 18). This argument relates to the immanent characteristics of the discourse and does not make a statement on the discourse's transformative effects in practice. Counter-hegemonic resistance needs such a discursive foundation in order to prevent incorporation in the first place, but this does not promise a sure-fire success when it comes to actual changes.

Whereas degrowth's counter- or sub-hegemonic potential has to be profoundly analysed, it is relatively straightforward to characterise the discursive field as an alternative economic imaginary. It distinguishes itself from the hegemonic neoliberal discourse through an alternative crisis interpretation. The following basic consensus is shared by all degrowth strands: economic growth and the destruction of human livelihoods cannot be decoupled; transformation of (Western industrial) societies is necessary; sustainable growth development is insufficient. This transformation has to be moderated through democratic and solidary processes in order to find an alternative that serves the wellbeing of everyone (i.a. Eversberg and Schmelzer 2016: 11; D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2016: 20f.; Paech 2012: 8; Muraca

2014: 11f.). The appeal to individual changes of lifestyles and the emphasis on possible individual impact is an important additional aspect of the consensus that is not explicitly mentioned in the literature.

Crisis interpretation within the imaginary of degrowth differs significantly from neoliberal interpretations. Crisis is here constructed as multidimensional. Connections between social and ecological aspects are recognised and ascribed to a common cause, namely a society formation that is based upon the pressure to grow (Burkhardt et al. 2016: 1). The scale of the crisis is assessed globally and as reaching into the future. While neoliberalism frames the crisis as one *within* the system, degrowth represents it as a crisis *of* the system. The re-politicisation of the lack of economic alternatives turns degrowth into an alternative economic imaginary that is potentially counter-hegemonic.

However, there is no such thing as *the* discourse of degrowth. Apart from the basic consensus set out above, the discursive field is composed of various heterogeneous strands reaching from conservative to anti-capitalist positions. Eversberg and Schmelzer (2015, 2016, 2018) have distinguished five different strands, by means of a questionnaire conducted at the “4th International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity” in Leipzig 2014.⁷ The five strands are: the *Sufficiency-oriented Critics of Civilization*, the *Immanent Reformers*, the *Voluntarist Idealists*, the *Modernist Rationalist Left* and the *Alternative Practical Left*. The analysis presented here only covers the sufficiency-oriented and the alternative practical left positions. This selection is due to the fact that the former positions have received great media attention and are hence widely considered as typical degrowth positions (cf. Nico Paech as advocate of the sufficiency-oriented strand). The positions of the latter, however, embody something specifically new combining two different

⁷ 814 of the c. 30000 conference participants completed the questionnaire. Although the results are not representative of the degrowth-movement as a whole, the biannual conferences are a good indicator for discourse production, networking, and self-perception within the field.

types of capitalist critique in a productive way. Based on Eversberg and Schmelzer (2016, 2018) the following is a short characterisation of the two positions.

Sufficiency-Oriented Critics of Civilization are characterised by radical-ecological positions that are critical of modern civilization. Only participants of this group consider climate change as the most urgent problem for humankind and hence deem ecological problems more serious than social ones. Preferred strategies for societal transformation are changes in personal lifestyles, the development of parallel societies in preparation for system collapse, and romanticisation of historical lifestyles. Sufficiency is commonly defined as the endeavour to live frugally in order to reduce the use of energy and resources (Paech 2014: 44).

The *Alternative Practical Left* group is characterised by a combination of a structure-oriented perspective with a progressive critique of social alienation aiming at subjective transformation. This position offers a different perspective on the relationship between structural selectivities and the scope of action for actors within them. Members of this group articulate themselves as clearly anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian; they support a revolutionary change. At the same time, they aim for a rediscovery of “spiritual dimensions” but not in a romantic-retrospective way. Practical leftists are often activists across a variety of issues and social movements and involved in large networks.

Sub-hegemonic tendencies of moralising degrowth discourses

The following analysis focuses on the counter-hegemonic and sub-hegemonic potential of the two discursive strands: (i) Sufficiency-Oriented Critics of Civilization and (ii) Alternative Practical Left. Hence, the practical transformative effects of the discourse are not addressed but rather whether and to what extent the discourse is already immanently prone to backing-up a passive revolution of neoliberalism. The question to be explored here is whether or not sufficiency-oriented strands of degrowth serve as sub-hegemonic imaginaries caught up in

specific neoliberal and general capitalist categories? Mechanisms of incorporation can only be successful if their object is discursively or structurally compatible.

As Eversberg and Schmelzer (2016; 2018) have shown, sufficiency-oriented positions explain the social ecological crisis as due to human misbehaviour and consider ecological problems most urgent. In accordance with this diagnosis, individual reduction in consumption, a radical change of lifestyle, a renunciation of long distance supply chains, as well as the establishment of regional supply structures, are the preferred ‘solutions’ (Schmelzer 2015: 118). Nico Paech, one of the most prominent advocates of this strand, speaks of an urgent need to relieve our societies from abundancy and outlines a degrowth-economy as an alternative (Paech 2012: 151). This economy is based upon four pillars: sufficiency (clearing out), subsistence (self-production), regional economy (e.g. regional currencies), and conversion of industry (e.g. focus on reparability, material zero-sum game). Contrary to the hegemonic neoliberal discourse, the crisis is construed in a multi-dimensional way: ecological overexploitation and socially excessive demands are assigned to the common cause of an economic pressure to grow. The neoliberal motto of “more and higher” is confronted with a mentality of “small is beautiful”. Instead of globalised economic cycles and free trade, which are regarded as increasing consumption and serving as new sources of wealth, sufficiency-oriented discourses count on a neighbourly economy that builds a connection between investors and producers (ibid.: 114ff.). Although this discourse seems to break radically with neoliberal lifestyles and technical solutions to the crisis, à la Green capitalism, this opposition is not as sharp as it seems at first sight.

The sufficiency-oriented strand is characterised by an emphasis on individual responsibility as both cause of and ‘solution’ to the social ecological crisis. Paech (2012: 99) states that there are no such things as sustainable technologies or objects: “only lifestyles can be sustainable” (my translation). The request to clear out one’s own life demands a reduction in consumption,

as well as an extension of self-production and sharing (ibid.: 122). Furthermore, he accuses individuals in the Northern hemisphere of living beyond their means (ibid.: 99). Eversberg and Schmelzer (2018: 256) found that almost 80% of persons within this current agree, that “individuals are personally responsible for the destructive consequences of their lifestyles”.

This moralising interpellation of individuals is echoed in the prevailing growth critique of this discursive strand. While growth and interest are rejected, domination and capitalist dynamics that make growth necessary are widely ignored (Brand 2012). The effects of property and power relations in the production of goods, for example, are not considered at all. The focus rather lies on consumer critique, which again turns to the individual as being responsible and does not account for structural selectivities: ecological, regional and fair consumption is not equally affordable for all individuals irrelevant of their social positioning. As Lessenich and Dörre (2014) show, this request is very compatible with the neoliberal ideology of renunciation: Both fail to differentiate between those who can afford to cut back and those who already live on the breadline (504). A report by Interessensgemeinschaft Robotercommunismus (2014), a critical, left German working group, also reveals analogies with neoliberal crisis management and its austerity programmes in the appeal to individuals to solve problems by a change of their personal behaviour (13).

Neoliberal and sufficiency-oriented discourses thus exhibit a similar way of interpellation of their subjects, i.e. focussing on individual responsibility, merit and self-discipline. This discursive connectivity enables mechanisms of incorporation to be successful and the sufficiency-oriented discourse to be interwoven in the merit-dispositif of neoliberalism. Overly emphasising personal responsibility can overwhelm the individual, and ignoring structural selectivities can lead to a lack of sufficient complexity in analysis. In addition, the reliance on individual responsibility can serve as flanking mechanisms in the crisis and help to stabilise the neoliberal hegemony (Sum and Jessop 2013: 425). Initiatives such as food

sharing, share and care groups on Facebook, or for-free-shops have the potential to substitute duties of the social welfare state and to become holding centres for individuals, who have fallen through the safety net of national state benefit programmes or failed to conform to the neoliberal pressure to perform (Altvater 2006: 19). A stabilising effect results from having those individuals cared for by alternative means, reducing their potential for contesting the prevailing system. If the contradictions inherent in the system, and distributional conflicts, are addressed successfully by spatially or temporally deferring the solution, then neoliberal hegemony can be maintained more easily. Notions of self-care and solidarity are therefore very welcome in a system that produces an ever-growing gap between rich and poor people (Moran 2015). Actions guided by the discourse of sufficiency can have a flanking effect and are certainly compatible with neoliberal relations; especially as their focus on individual responsibility and efficacy puts the necessity of structural struggles in the background.

Another example, to show how potentially compatible alternatives serve the modernisation of neoliberalism, is the concept of the sharing economy. From a sufficiency-oriented position sharing reduces the use of resources through an intensification of use. However, as long as this mode of consumption takes place within the framework of capitalist property relations, it is absolutely compatible with neoliberal ideas of valorisation and can contribute to the economisation of previously uncommodified domains; this is evident in the conduct of firms such as AirBnb and Uber. Individual users become “small capitalists”, increasingly capitalise their private life and strengthen their entrepreneurial self (Oberhuber 2016). Efforts to make sufficiency concepts ‘business ready’ can even be found within in the degrowth community as in the work of Uwe Schneidewind, president of the Wuppertal Institute, who analyses sufficiency as a business (Schneidewind and Palzkill 2011). These examples show that the idea of sufficiency can readily be picked up by the neoliberal discourse of Green or qualitative growth, serving as a sub-hegemonic discourse.

The mechanism of incorporation at work here can best be described as path dependency. That is, alternative discourses (or actions) that are compatible with the prevailing system and its power relations are more likely to be absorbed than to develop a counter-hegemony due to the structural and discursive superiority of the hegemony. Sufficiency-oriented positions are at high risk of incorporation. They exhibit a reduced and individualising growth critique that guides actions, which are not inextricably at odds with neoliberalism.

Counter-hegemonic potential of politicised degrowth discourses

The practical left discourse expresses a form of capitalist critique that combines elements of a structural and an ethical critique. While the former refers to systemically produced injustice and exploitation, the latter is a critique of alienation, referring to capitalism as a form of world-relation and self-relation (Jaeggi 2013: 15). Eversberg and Schmelzer (2018) found this combination in the structure-oriented critique of industrialism, which defines social inequality as the most urgent future problem, which is combined with the desire to rediscover the “spiritual dimensions of life” (262f.). The latter is, however, not meant as nature romanticism or religious escapism, but an engagement with visions and utopias of the *good life* (Muraca 2014: 77ff.). Thus, the discourse is not exclusively concerned with the analysis of social injustices, but also with constructive resistance directed at changing one’s own positioning within social structures. Here, the individual is also held to account, but in a limited, potentially more feasible way. Structural problems are recognised and it becomes clear that the effect of individual lifestyle changes is confined and needs to be contextualised (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018: 263). This insight might offer a motivating effect for individuals without expecting too much of them. Their interpellation occurs in the context of the two-fold critique of capitalism: (i) an individual cannot overcome structural dynamics of capitalism on their own, but (ii) she/he can reflect and consequently start to strategically challenge their own contribution to reproducing those structures.

Marx uses the concept of alienation to describe the phenomenon that humans perceive the products of their own work as alien. This eventually culminates in the so-called fetish-form when “the social characteristics of [women/]men's own labour [are reflected] as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things” (Marx 1990: 164f.). In the context of (neoliberal) capitalism, this is reflected in the prevailing economic imaginary within which the individuals perceive the economic system as independent, natural, and standing outside society - as being disembedded. Opposing this alienation, a new notion of economy gains ground: an economy that does not serve the accumulation of capital but the satisfaction of needs, in short the good life (Muraca 2014: 85). Ideas of such a solidarity-based economy are combined with a re-embedding of economy into society and open up a degree of freedom to act differently (Altvater 2006: 17). This overcoming of societal subjection under the market and the deliberate reconstruction of economy is an important hint at the counter-hegemonic potential of practical left degrowth discourses.

The neoliberal logic of market superiority, which leads to an economisation of life, is here countered with the principle of solidarity, based upon an awareness of commonality, inner connectedness, and fairness. Deconstructing the economy as an abstract idea, in contrast to its postulated objective reality, results in a repoliticisation of the economy that gives space for strategic action (Fournier 2008: 533). The combination of structural and ethical capitalist critique entails an interpellation of the individual that calls for reflection and self-empowerment in order to change societal relations. It starts by resisting the merit-dispositif of neoliberalism and at least discursively opposing it with an idea of solidarity.

While the main question of this paper is whether a specific way of defining degrowth can be more easily incorporated in the neoliberal discourse than others, some possible consequences for action can be briefly outlined. Actions that are guided by the practical left discourse have a

higher political-strategic potential than their sufficiency-oriented counterparts because of the discourse's connection of structural analysis with individual degrees of freedom to participate in resistant practices. Eversberg and Schmelzer (2015) have pointed out anarchical influences within the practical left (15). Societal transformation starts within one's own practices and the change of one's own subject-position by acting differently deliberately. Such an approach corresponds to an anarchical understanding of revolution according to which revolution is not a big rebellious incident but a continuous struggle for freedom (Graeber 2013: 302). According to Gramsci's analysis of hegemony, common sense has to be influenced and formed, if a counter-hegemonic project is to be successful. A similar thought returns in the anarchical revolutionary strategy: "We have to establish our freedom by cutting wholes into the mash of our reality, by creating new realities that will form us for their part" (CrimethInc Collective, quoted in Graeber 2013: 303, my translation). The interdependence of subjective and societal transformation is very evident in this statement. Characteristic for the practical left discourse is its support for direct actions (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018: 263). Such practices aim at self-empowerment, i.e. at bringing about a transformation through and within their own actions (Graeber 2013: 18). While a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Agriculture constitutes an indirect action, as the protestors request the ministry to change its policies, in a direct action participants take the problem into their own hands. Direct actions in that sense are struggles on the micro-level aiming to subvert the hegemonic formation by transforming its subjects. This strategy seems to turn the mechanism of interpellation upside down: the non-recognition of the hegemonic discourse and the divergent self-constitution of its former subjects might eventually affect the discourse itself.

Contrasting the Two Degrowth Discourses

How are direct actions that are motivated by the practical left discourse different from the claims and practices of the sufficiency-oriented strand? At first glance both practices aim at

the introduction of societal transformation by individual lifestyle changes. However, the decisive difference is, that in the sufficiency-oriented case the behavioural change appears to be a reaction to a moralising interpellation that is not reflexive of the structural context. Actions motivated by this discursive strand might lead to the establishment of parallel structures that either coexist with the neoliberal hegemony or even contribute to its stabilisation without reflecting its dynamics. Due to the discourse's under-complex analysis of the structural context, those actions can be easily reframed and incorporated in a neoliberal context; as shown by the examples of sharing economy and voluntary social networks.

In contrast, the call for self-empowerment, in the discourse of the practical left, is political-strategic, because it is linked to demands for macro-social changes, i.e. the ethical critique of neoliberal capitalism is supplemented with a structural one. Such practices do escape the moralising interpellation due to their reflection of the structural context. In that sense, they are less and more far-reaching at the same time. On the one hand, they are more realistic concerning the individual influence on systemic changes. On the other hand, they aim for radical societal change and are not satisfied with living on islands midst a neoliberal ocean. Hence, actions do not stop at the individual level, but are performed knowingly and intentionally attacking the wider processes of hegemonic reproduction.

It is argued that the motivation for action is different in both cases as well as unequally far-reaching. If dumpster diving, i.e. the collection of food from the supermarket's rubbish bin, is motivated by the sufficiency-oriented discourse, the action is performed out of a sense of self-responsibility that is easily taken up and satisfied by neoliberal adaptation. Supermarkets have already started donating their expired products to 'social markets', where social benefit receivers can buy them at very low cost. A new business is born while the conscience is soothed since food is not wasted any more. Motivated by a practical-left discourse, the same action gains a double meaning: (i) the liberation from a 'subjectivation' to the economic

necessity to consume commodities and (ii) the temporary disruption of a capitalist process. In its radical (i.e. ‘reaching the roots of’) critique of capitalism, the practical-left discourse can hardly be incorporated in neoliberalism. Unlike in the case of the sufficiency-oriented strand, acting to achieve what is deemed morally right on an individual level is not enough. Individual behavioural change is not understood as the compensation for (or escape from) a flawed system but the starting point to change it collectively. This logic is based on an understanding of society as interdependent social relations that can only be transformed by collective effort. Consequentially, the emergence of ‘social markets’ would have to be scrutinized once more.

Considering practical effects, it is theoretically possible that isolated, individual lifestyle changes, motivated by the sufficiency-oriented discourse, could culminate in a social transformation. However, having in mind structural and discursive selectivities that lead to path dependency and processes of incorporation, it is rather unlikely that these scale effects will ever be reached. An act, even a concerted political action, that can be incorporated and framed in hegemonic terms, is very likely to end up this way. The decisive criterion for differentiating sub-hegemonic from counter-hegemonic discourses is their anchoring in different forms of growth critique and their take on individual responsibility.

In order to achieve structural effects alongside the discursive delimitation, micro-struggles have to be combined with those on a macro-level and scaled up in order to avoid a niche existence being tolerated within hegemony. This means that everyday resistance struggles eventually have to be brought together in a concerted political project. Radical transformation requires collective actions and an extroverted form of politicisation alongside self-transformations, initially even within the neoliberal infrastructure. There has to be a combination of *voice* and *exit* strategies: Forms of protests that aim at leaving the prevailing system (*exit*) and forms of protest that use the criticised system in order to change it

(Hirschmann, 2004 quoted in Hälderlein 2010: 332ff.; Wright 2010). Due to the practical lefts' discursive resilience towards neoliberal incorporation, this strand of discourse seems to be more promising, than the sufficiency-oriented version, as a means of initiating a counter-hegemonic degrowth project. While this is a theoretical argument, the assertiveness of such a project has to be analysed empirically.

Conclusions

While neoliberal hegemony is contested on materialist grounds, it can be seen as hegemonic on a discursive level. Setting out specific ways of subjectivations and normalisations under the label of “merit-dispositif”, allows identification of the mechanisms by which neoliberal hegemony is reproduced. This then has implications for those opposing the hegemony.

The argument that alternative economic models have a merely stabilising and flanking function in the social ecological crisis appears flawed, along with claims that neoliberalism is the “end of history” and any resistance is futile. This paper shows the necessity of taking a differentiated look at alternative discourses and imaginaries and dividing them into different discursive strands. By doing so, the danger of hegemonic co-optation and re-coding of an allegedly alternative and resistant imaginary can be thoroughly examined. Investigating two strands of the degrowth discourse and separating them from the neoliberal discourse of Green capitalism, shows how they can be categorised as sub-hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. Three dimensions were identified in that respect: the mode of growth critique, the interpellation of the discourse's subjects and the kind of actions that follow in terms of addressing structure. Discursive strands within degrowth that argue for alternative societal structures on the basis of individual sufficiency, while remaining tied to the logic of neoliberal hegemony, have a potential stabilising effect in times of crisis. Critique in that sense can create a ‘passive revolution’, and merely help modify what they actually wanted to

undermine or abolish. In contrast, degrowth discourses that utilise self-transformation in a reflexive and political-strategic manner can have a potentially destabilising effect if they gain ground and are scaled up. Even if it seems to be a tightrope walk to interpret self-transformation and individual lifestyle changes both in terms of de-politicisation and as strategies of politicisation, the contextualisation of these practices within the logics of the discourse makes the difference clear. This differentiation becomes even more plausible when bearing in mind mechanisms of path dependency, that advantage the adoption of discourses and practices into the prevailing system, over establishing new relations.

While this analysis has focused on the intrinsic vulnerability of degrowth discourses to being incorporated into neoliberal hegemony, and only briefly mentioned subsequent actions, future research will have to engage more deeply with the practical consequences. Even if some strands of degrowth are more prone to neoliberal incorporations than others, it is imaginable that a radical degrowth discourse will be more easily marginalised and therefore exert hardly any influence on societal transformation. This danger has to be balanced against the risk of co-option by the hegemonic neoliberal discourse.

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