It's the Economy Stupid

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The number one obstacle to addressing the overlapping environmental crises that we currently face is the economy. Its orientation towards growth, whether capitalist or otherwise, is pushing the planet beyond its safe operating limits.[i] If there is just one lesson that both degrowth researchers and environmental historians can successfully impart to a wider public, it is Herman Daly's pronouncement: "The economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment, not the reverse."[ii] Only once this relationship has been fully appreciated can we begin to adopt economic policies that are no longer damaging to both the Earth and our social systems.

To date, the boundaries between environmental and economic history have been too rigid. Environmental historians have certainly engaged with economic questions, revisiting the Industrial Revolution and the Great Divergence, and highlighting the importance of natural resources to international trade networks.[iii] But the economy itself, and the rules and regulations that govern its operation, have largely been left to other subdisciplines.

We cannot afford this myopia any longer. Bill Clinton famously kept a post-it note that read "It's the economy stupid" close at hand during his first presidential campaign. According to his neoliberal logic, all that voters cared about was the economy, and he wanted to be reminded of this at every turn. To push back against this mode of thinking, environmental historians and degrowthers alike should take a lesson from the Situationnists, a group of radical artists and intellectuals, active in the mid-twentieth century, who advocated that we reclaim public space by practicing what they termed *détournement*. A word that meant both 'hijacking' and 'deflection' or 'redirection, détournement was to be used by targets of capitalist messaging to co-opt its content and turn it against itself. To that end, we should carry with us at all times a note that reads "It's the economy stupid" – not in order to reproduce a set of social relations that prizes growth above all else, as Clinton hoped to do, but rather to *undo* this set of relations, to "escape from the economy."[iv] One of the slogans that the Situationists immortalised with their grafitti practice during the protests of 1968 was "You cannot fall in love with a growth rate" ("On ne tombe pas amoureaux d'un taux de croissance)."[v] To remind ourselves that 'It's the economy stupid', is to remind ourselves that the never-ending drive toward economic growth not only damages the planet, but also disciplines our affective desires.

While the obsession with growth is not limited to capitalist systems, as discussed by Andy Bruno in this forum, its origins are rooted in capitalist-infused orthodox economic thinking.[vi] As a logic that organizes not just the economy, but also social relations, capitalism is rooted in the pursuit of profit, the sanctity of private property, and the allocation of resources through market forces. The degrowth movement wishes to upend all three of these principles.[vii] In a world defined by degrowth, people would value "enough" over "more"; those resources that are most essential to life (e.g. water, housing) would be held in common; and money would no longer determine access to fundamental goods like food, education, and medical care. Without the stress that comes with the structural violence of a system that will deny you the means of life for want of money, people will be happier, more generous with each other, and more fulfilled.

At the heart of the debate between those who continue to advocate for growth and those who instead call for degrowth is a fundamental disagreement about the nature of what it is to be human. When orthodox economics came into its own as a discipline, in the nineteenth century, it was constructed around the figure of the *homo economicus*, a rational self-interested actor with unlimited wants whose main purpose in life was to maximize utility. We

now know that *homo economicus* is the human at the center of anthropogenic climate change. If economists, and the policy makers over whom they hold outsized influence, continue to take it for granted that humans are self-interested competitive maximizing monads, then they will continue reproducing a world that encourages these traits. But if policy makers assume instead that, under the right set of conditions, humans can be cooperative socially-minded empaths, then they can begin to build a world in which we are bound by mutual responsibility not only to each other but to the Earth as well.[viii] So how might we reimagine what it is to be human in the face of planetary destruction?

Environmental historians might contribute to this politics of imagination by reconstructing the historical developments that led to the triumph of a system premised on profit, private property, and market-determined access to life. What might environmental histories of capitalism look like?[ix] One area that feels ripe for revision is the history of consumption, a field that first peaked in the 1980s and 1990s. Once again, there are lessons to be learned from the Situationists, who mounted a powerful critique of what they termed "the Society of the Spectacle."[x] In a similar vein, degrowthers often call for an end to advertising in public spaces, and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, one of the forerunners of degrowth, advocated for an end to fashion and a rejection of "extravagant gadgetry."[xi] If there is any hope of transitioning to a degrowth economy, the culture of rampant consumerism must be abandoned, a point that Frederik Albritton Jonsson and Carl Wennerlind also explore in this forum. How might environmental historians rethink older approaches to the history of consumption to foreground the risk posed to planetary limits by unchecked consumer desire?

The second step in building an intellectually robust foundation for degrowth is to research historical examples of life-sustaining economies that demonstrate the possibility of living well without growth. When have people chosen to forego economic growth? When have people valued public goods over private riches? And it won't do simply to research how people lived before cheap replacements became an option, or before the extensive privatization of resources. We need examples of people *choosing* more labor-intensive life-sustaining options as an alternative to growth. Lastly, while historical research can furnish us with examples of how we might move forward, it is imperative that we remember, as Julia Adeney Thomas argues here, that time moves only in one direction, and while we can build on models offered by the past, we must do so with a full appreciation of the constraints operating in both the present and future.

In my own work on the history of agricultural industrialization in twentieth-century France, I came across many farmers who tried to abstain from state-mandated economic growth. Unwilling to trade their autonomy for higher revenues, they refused to scale up. Many tried to continue farming with draft animals, uninterested in taking on the debt required to mechanize. Some went onto establish organic operations and were able to develop an alternative to the environmentally damaging push for ever- increasing yields.[xii] But on the whole, they were unable to stave off the industrial turn. The state's investment in a model of economic growth fueled by agricultural exports was simply too great to be resisted by a handful of renegade farmers. And voters, a majority of whom were not working in agriculture, were too hooked on decreasing food prices, and the extra discretionary spending that they facilitated, to lend their support. The historical record is full of similar examples, reminders of just how difficult it is to resist the tide of economic growth. In revisiting these turning points in the historical record, to understand how people resisted and why the growth model nevertheless prevailed, we can develop a better sense of how to build a successful degrowth politics in the present.

One of the most important contributions that the degrowth movement has made is to re-politicize environmental degradation. Mainstream discourse surrounding the climate crisis has been overwhelmingly dominated by a technocratic language of "solutions." From

electrifying the grid to carbon capture, none of these proposals address the real root of the problem, which is the mindless pursuit of what Julie Livingston has termed "self-devouring growth." While growth can be healthy and a sign of vitality, self-devouring growth operates instead according to a logic of "uninhibited consumption," in which we must "grow or die; grow or be eaten."[xiii] In analyzing the differences between non-capitalist systems for satisfying vital human needs and those that are rooted in a 'grow or die' mentality, Livingston demonstrates how self-devouring growth in postcolonial Botswana has led to levels of inequality that have had an absolutely toxic effect upon the body politic. To repair these social relations, a new politics must be adopted, one that binds human and more-than-human beings together in collective self-agreement.

Contrary to Fredric Jameson's tantalizing soundbite, it is not in fact easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.[xiv] I, for one, imagine the end of capitalism on a regular basis. And while the degrowth movement has much to offer, both politically and intellectually, its most important contribution is its imagining of a non-capitalist world. From policy proposals that include public housing and a universal basic income for all, to an emphasis on conviviality and the creation of mutually-fulfilling social relationships, degrowthers have spent the last fifty years developing a fairly clear picture of what life after capitalism might look like.[xv] And I have to say, it looks pretty good.

[i] For more on safe operating spaces, see Johan Rockström, et al., "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Nature* 461 (2009): 472–475.

[ii] https://www.isecoeco.org/dr-herman-daly-nobel-prize-nomination/

[iii] For example, see Christopher Otter, *Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Gregg Mitmann, *Empire of Rubber: Firestone's Scramble for Land and Power in Liberia* (New York: The New Press, 2021); Jonathan Robins, *Oil Palm: A Global History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

[iv] Valérie Fournier, "Escaping from the Economy: The Politics of Degrowth." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 28, no. 11/12 (2008): 528–45.

[v] For more on the Situationnists, see Alastair Hemmens and Gabriel Zacarias, eds., *The Situationist International: A Critical Handbook* (London: Pluto Press, 2020; and McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages Out of the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso Books, 2013).

[vi] For an overview of the history of economic growth, see Venus Bivar, "Historicizing Economic Growth: An Overview of Recent Works," *The Historical Journal* 65, No. 5 (2022): 1470-1489.

[vii] For more on this critique, see Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan, *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022).

[viii] For more on alternative ways of organising human society, see David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

[ix] For a recent example, see Mark Stoll, *Profit: An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022). While not solely focused on capitalism and environment, there are plenty of valuable insights into this relationship in Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2019).

[x] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

[xi] Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, "Energy and Economic Myths," *Southern Economic Journal* 41 (January 1975): 378.

[xii] Venus Bivar, *Organic Resistance: The Struggle over Industrial Farming in Postwar France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

[xiii] Julie Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 5.

[xiv] Frederic Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (May-June 2003): 76.

[xv] For examples spanning this period, see Georgescu-Roegen, "Energy and Economic Myths," *Southern Economic Journal* 41 (January 1975): 347-381; Jason Hickel, "Degrowth: A Theory of Radical Abundance," *Real World Economics Review* (March 2019): 54-68.