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THESIS SUMMARY

Capitalist realism or post-growth? Evidence from mental growth infrastructures of post-capitalist organisations

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1. Introduction

Among many scholars, the capitalist system is presented as the root cause of the social and ecological problems humanity is facing. Its drawbacks include the exploitation of natural resources (Klein, 2015) , rising social inequality (Howarth & Kennedy, 2016), overworked, burned out individuals (Gorski & Chen, 2015) and failure to reduce carbon emissions (Buller, 2022) which threaten the living conditions of all life on earth (Brand et al., 2021) . Therefore,

among other concerned citizens, degrowth movements and academics explore the transition towards a post-capitalist society.

2. Research Gap and Research Question

In this realm of research, a post-capitalist transition is mainly reviewed as an economic and social undertaking, and rarely as a psychological one. A peer-reviewed literature review by Weiss and Cattaneo (2017) found that while a large section of academic degrowth articles addresses the economic aspects of degrowth, none address a psychological dimension of degrowth.[1]

This stands in contrast to theorists who argue that capitalism is much more than an economic system (Cole & Ferrarese, 2018; Weber, 1930) , but comes with what Harald Welzer (2011) refers to as "Mental Growth Infrastructures" which will be discussed in the next section. At the same time, many social scientists argue that the search process for sustainability must focus much more on mind-sets (Fischer & Riechers, 2019; Göpel, 2016). Interested in the psychological transformation towards post-capitalism, the main question of my thesis was: *To what extent do post-capitalist organizations exhibit mental infrastructures of a growth ideology?*

3. Theoretical Framework: Mental Growth Infrastructures

Mental Growth Infrastructures, after Welzer (2011), are broadly defined as the psychological and cultural formations that influence individuals to pursue economic growth. Based on the relevance for the organizational context, which was the focus of the thesis due to the important role that organizations have in the capitalist system (Rätzer et al., 2018), the mental infrastructures *acceleration of time*, *the constant need to progress* and the *non-stop work mentality* were tested to answer the research question.

The *acceleration of time*, or what Rosa (2015) calls "Social Acceleration", describes the increasing pace of life: more things must get done in a particular period of time, and to be busy is perceived as exemplary. Secondly, the *need to progress,* is, according to Welzer (2011), the strong desire for (quantifiable) improvement of organizational activities, demonstrated

by the drive to become ever more efficient. Lastly, the *non-stop work mentality* includes the blurring of life and work, and the resulting phenomenon that work never really finishes (Welzer, 2011). These three mental components are particularly important for the position that degrowth scholars hold on capitalism, as degrowth is understood as a movement that advocates a slower lifestyle counter to acceleration, work addiction and relentless progress (Büchs & Koch, 2019; Kallis et al., 2013; Löwy et al., 2022).

4. Methods

Qualitative, interview-based methods were used, and interviews were semi-structured. This means the questions were guided by the theoretical framework (see Appendix 1), but the interview was kept flexible to give participants the space to communicate what they wanted to say. Eight participants from six organizations were interviewed for one to two hours. Of these organizations, five are based in Berlin and one in Budapest. I interviewed organizations which could be linked to post-capitalism and degrowth (e.g., an agroecological farm and food delivery service; a digital tool library) to keep open the option of discovering resistances and transformations of *Mental Growth Infrastructures*. Eventually, the data was coded and analyzed with the software MAXQDA 2020.

5. Results

The interviews provided a much more diverse picture of *Mental Growth Infrastructures* than the one outlined by Welzer (2011). Instead, I encountered different forms of growth mentalities from the interviews. A specific explanation will be given for each variable respectively.

5.1. The Acceleration of Time

With regards to the variable of time, mixed evidence was found. Some organizations *implicitly* endorsed and embodied speed and business; they demonstrated that being fast is part of their mentality but did not explicitly state so. For instance, one interviewee rushed through the interview and reminded me that I had "six minutes left before our scheduled meeting time is over", suggesting that I should "ask the remaining questions of interest now". Other organizations stated they *implicitly* accepted the acceleration of time because they must

satisfy customers and partner organizations. The nature of time (e.g., seasons for farming) also had a strong impact on how fast many organizations operated, indicating that speed and business are not entirely constructed by the capitalist system. These interviewees were aware that becoming faster also means more stress but felt forced to speed up in order to be a serious alternative to capitalist entities.

In contrast to this, some organizations were deliberately keeping their operations at a slow pace: they viewed being slow as a form of resistance against the capitalist market dynamics. Some organizations even refer to slowness as their "organizational philosophy", they explicitly wanted to "decelerate". This slowness resulted in more creativity and work satisfaction, according to the interviewees. All in all, some organizations were therefore implicitly embodying the speeding up due to (mainly) external factors, while others took an explicit stance for slowness and deceleration.

5.2. The Need to Progress

With regards to the need to progress, the second variable, organizations showed diverging views again. Not a single organization prioritized the accumulation of wealth or similar endorsements of economic growth as progress. Instead, some organizations centered their idea of progress around the concept of "social impact", which they defined as the degree to which you do good. They aimed to increase their social impact by measuring, for instance, the number of emissions they save via their activities. The function of using those metrics was to know how to improve the organizational performance over time, according to the interviewees. They believed the bigger the social impact of their organization, the better. These organizations also wanted to become better in what they were doing, calling it "natural and important" to drive for efficiency. The term "optimization" was also used by a few interviewees.

On the other hand, some organizations were more skeptical. Those believed that desire for growth and progress also negatively affects the quality of operations. As one interviewee explained: "If we increase the number of agri-food boxes we sell, we automatically become more mechanized […] and we thus rather restrict our scale to the human scale." Limiting efficiency helped this organization to maintain a human-centered way of operating. This was

connected to organizational policies like a cap on production, which was found in many organizations. A bike-repair shop owner, for instance, said: "Efficiency is the wrong driver. More to make more people happy? I am not so sure if we want this […]. We want counter-progress." Therefore, a general *skepticism* towards progress was found, alongside a desire to quantify and enhance the *impact* of the organizations.

5.3. Work Non-Stop

With regards to the work variable, organizations also indicated diverging perspectives. Many interviewees stated that they cannot stop thinking about their work, even at home or at weekends, which is evidence for Welzer's (2011) work non-stop mentality. One interviewee claimed she is "always at work, except when we sleep." Another one described the "blurring line between private time, engagements and formal working hours," while holding multiple inter-linked jobs. Some of those interviewees described their work as "meaningful", "thriving", "fun" or "self-actualizing" (but also "stressful") which was why work was embedded so much into their lives and selves. The reason for non-stop work was often because they were *passionate* about their job.

In contrast, many other organizations rejected the idea of working all the time. They valued leisure as an essential part of their philosophy, claiming to care about life outside the job too. This entailed care work for family members and themselves. Those organizations refused to be available for calls and email correspondence 24/7. This, as some interviewees experienced, often increased their quality and creativity at work. Again, the interviewees provided two diverging perspectives towards the variable: there was evidence for a work non-stop mentality due to *passion* for work, and there was another perspective which resisted non-stop work by viewing *leisure* as importantly as the work itself.

5.4. Organizational Relations

A final mental infrastructure emerged from the interviews. This component is characterized by the way organizations perceive themselves in relation to other organizations. I have called it *Organizational Relations*. The interview data provided two approaches to this variable: one approach was to be rather self-orientated, with organizations intentionally distinguishing

themselves from others, resembling how companies find a niche position in the capitalist market. As one interviewee indicated: "Surely we have to distinguish ourselves from others. Sometimes we want to position ourselves via social media." This was reflected in the vocabulary of many interviewees, who frequently called other organizations "competitors". These organizations were very strategic in how they interact with other organizations too, and often searched for the benefits of networking. I called this the *Organizational Self Mind-Set*.

Conversely, other interviewees highlight that cooperation, and not competition, is what defines their organization in relation to others. These organizations were highly dissatisfied with the dog-eat-dog society and shrinking unconditional support in a capitalist market. They practiced mutuality and co-learning and were helping other organizations, for instance by unconditionally aiding each other in the COVID-19 economic recession. Due to the altruistic nature of this mind-set, I called it the *Solidarity Mind-Set*.

Overall, since results regarding each variable contest and/or expand Welzer's (2011) work on Mental Growth Infrastructures significantly, a new *Organizational Framework for Mental Growth Infrastructures* is proposed, adding *Mental Green Growth Infrastructures* (MGGIs) and *Mental Post-Growth Infrastructures* (MPGIs) (see *Table 1*). This framework is tentative, and its structure will be reflected on in the next section.

Table 1. Organizational Framework for Mental Growth Infrastructures.

Variable	Mental Growth Infrastructure	Mental Green Growth Infrastructure	Mental Post-Growth Infrastructure
Time	Explicit Acceleration	Implicit Acceleration	Explicit Deceleration
Progress	Economic Progress	Impact Progress	Progress Skepticism
Work	Work Non-Stop	Work As Passion	Work and Leisure
Organizational Relations	Competition Mind-Set	Organizational Self Mind-Set	Solidarity Mind-Set

6. Discussion, Limitations and Future Research

This study found that organizations linked to post-capitalism barely exhibit *Mental Growth Infrastructures* as outlined by Welzer *(2011)*. Instead, the statements by the interviewees cluster around two different mentalities. Firstly, there is evidence that organizations slightly modify the *Mental Growth Infrastructures* with a different intention of adopting them, while not transforming them completely. This means the variables of time, progress, efficiency or work non-stop are "greened" (e.g., economic progress becomes social impact). I call this cluster *Mental Green Growth Infrastructures*, as they link to the discourse around green growth, i.e., the idea that we need to enhance the parameters of the capitalist system to achieve sustainability rather than contesting the system itself.

Secondly, there are also organizations that radically contest and transform *Mental Growth Infrastructures.* This cluster is called *Mental Post-Growth Infrastructures,* resembling the post-growth ethos that deep, fundamental changes away from growth and capitalism are necessary in the search for a just and ecologically sustainable world. Overall, this thesis, in contrast to Welzer's (2011) claims, provides scientific evidence that other mental infrastructures exist, and thus has generated a new framework for future research around growth mentalities.

This framework is a proposal which should be viewed tentatively. The number of interviewees was rather small, and a different set of organizations might provide different results, especially as I focused on post-capitalist organizations in the first place.[2] It must also be emphasized that the results should not interpreted as the segregation of different "types" of organizations. The thesis only supports the division of perspectives. Many organizations embodied both growth mentalities and post-growth mentalities at the same time. I do not think this is a contradiction. Rather, it demonstrates that internal inconsistencies can exist within mentalities (Lahire, 2008).

This thesis provides a first empirical account for different growth mentalities. More research is necessary for understanding the consequences of embodying different mental infrastructures, including which organizational outcomes are being pursued and how those goals are being achieved. I would hypothesize that *Mental Green Growth Infrastructures* might facilitate interactions with capitalist entities, whereas an organization with *Mental Post-Growth Infrastructures* could face difficulties in interacting with the capitalist system (e.g., slow production could hamper business partnerships, or create dissatisfaction in customers who are used to instant availability and limitless consumption). Based on Welzer's (2011) argument, one should be critical towards all *Mental Growth Infrastructures*. This thesis and its new framework suggest a more open evaluation of whether, and which, mental growth infrastructures are problematic. Is being passionate about one's work and therefore thinking about work 24/7 really a problem? The results of this thesis welcome future research into which mental components organizations could, should and do embrace, if any at all.

In conclusion, a mental dimension to post-capitalism can create different ways of thinking about post-growth transformations. The project of post-capitalism should not be restricted to economic and political tasks but facilitated by critical discussion around *Mental Growth Infrastructures* in both society and organizations.

Conflict of interest

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

Part I: Introduction and Post-Capitalism

1) What is your organization doing?

2) How is your organization an alternative to more capitalist orientated organizations?

3) What is a post-capitalist organization in your perspective?

Part II: Social Acceleration

4) How are you managing time within your organization's operations?

5) How would you describe the "pace" of your organization?

6) What influences the pace of your organization? // Why do you have the above mentioned pace level?

7) How often does the organization take time for reflection and contemplation? How valuable is this time?

Part III: Progress

8) Do you think "getting better" is an important part of your organization?

9) Why do you (not) want to get better at what you are doing?

10) To what extent do you measure your improvements? How?

Part IV: Flexible Non-Stop Work

11) What are everyone's working hours in the organization?

12) How often to do you think about work outside working hours?