



ESSAY

Degrowth and Masculinities: Towards a gendered understanding of degrowth subjectivities

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1. Introduction

Modern capitalist societies depend on growth, i.e., on the permanent and limitless expansion of economic activity. In the degrowth debate, it has often been argued that this societal compulsion to grow is not only rooted in an economic system geared around profits and in hierarchical societal structures that enforce participation in ‘the economy’, but that it has also deeply inscribed itself into the worldviews, sensibilities and practical dispositions of people living in such societies (Eversberg, 2014; Latouche, 2005; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Yet, while in a growth society everybody’s subjectivity – how we relate to ourselves and the world – is profoundly influenced by the effects of this expansionary logic. The forms that this assumes vary widely according to the different ways in which people are involved in how growth is generated and experienced, and the kinds of work they are typically tasked with – in short, on their positionality in society, intersectionally understood (Crenshaw, 1989). That is, not every subjectivity into which growth has inscribed itself as a ‘normalcy’ can be rightly labelled a ‘growth subjectivity’ (normalcy can also be viewed critically, even experienced as

unbearable). Still, it seems possible to describe a certain logic or ‘grammar’ of relating to oneself and the rest of the world that is logically most in line with the demands and promises of growth. When actively internalised, it ‘anchors’ the growth imperative within the individual, turns them into its willing agents and faithful believers, and thus strengthens the growth-centric and structurally externalising imperial mode of living.

In this narrower sense, we may conceive of the *growth subject* as a subject accustomed to asserting itself as an actively sovereign agent by accumulating ever greater and more far-reaching capacities for action while negating or denying its own dependency on others’ care and the natural environment. As a mass phenomenon, this type of experience and the subjectivities it has formed have only become possible under conditions of expansionary modern societies since the onset of the fossil age.

In the dominant cultural imaginary of growth societies, this figure of the growth subject is powerfully gendered: it is coded as masculine. The classical figure of the white bourgeois, the agent of capitalist expansion, is that of a *man* seeking to optimally deploy the resources at his disposal so as to rationally and purposefully enlarge them (Harrison, 1999; Hunt, 1996; Tosh, 2005).

This image, however, makes the social and natural preconditions of such supposedly sovereign activity invisible. And it conceals the fact that this kind of agency could only be asserted based on hierarchical divisions of both a symbolic and practical nature, allowing the socially privileged male to appropriate nature and the labour of those excluded from such privileged status. ‘Masculine domination’ has thus become inscribed in the gendered division of labour of capitalist societies as well as in their cultural imagery, which associates masculinity with public visibility, independence, strength, technological dominance and control over human and nonhuman nature (Biesecker & Hofmeister, 2010; Bourdieu, 2001; Federici, 2004; Merchant, 1983).

This does not mean that only men are growth subjects and that others are not, nor that all men have incorporated growth subjectivity in the same way and to the same degree – but rather that key aspects of growth subjectivities are coded as masculine due to the historical

genealogies of their cultural understandings. In fact, within modern growth societies the cultural, social and economic logics that structure people's everyday experience are so deeply impregnated with 'masculine' principles of expansion, exclusion and competition that these leave a mark on everybody, regardless of gender. Growth societies are inherently androcentric societies because their inner logic makes masculine growth subjectivities the norm and the condition for success. While everybody is to some degree subject to 'masculine' growth subjectivation, the variable forms of 'hegemonic masculinity' that arise as epitomes of the successful growth subject are most readily adopted and performed by men (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pulé & Hultman, 2021; Salleh, 2017).

This historically constituted relationship between gendered subjectivities and modern capitalist expansionism is crucial for understanding the logic of growth societies and possible alternatives. Feminists have long been pointing this out and calling for a more thorough engagement of the entire degrowth spectrum with gender relations and patriarchal dominance (Abazeri, 2022; Barca, 2020; Bauhardt, 2014; Dengler & Strunk, 2018). They have rightly highlighted the invisibilised caring relationships and the enormous amount of labour, symbolically and economically devalued as 'feminine', without which all the achievements of those male heroes of capitalist development would not have been possible. A complementary aspect of the feminist challenge to the degrowth community, however, has long received too little attention: The difficult question of what role(s) men and masculinities might play in the course of social transformations away from growth dependency (Smith Khanna, 2021). How can masculinities rooted in the logic of growth and dominance be overcome? What alternatives to existing conceptions of masculinity are conceivable that would not stand in the way of degrowth transformations, but could play a fruitful part in fostering them?

In this essay we want to suggest that the approaches to transforming self- and world-relations that are present in degrowth debates and practices contain a number of core elements of what it will take to overcome the bourgeois-capitalist mode of subjectivation. Degrowth societies will have to be very different from capitalist modernity, not merely in terms of their material and institutional infrastructures and the logics according to which they are organised, but also in terms of how people conceive of themselves and relate to others as well as to extra-human nature. Capitalist modernity's expansive-individualist ideal of

growth subjectivity will need to be supplanted, succeeded or replaced by degrowth subjectivities that reintegrate precisely those relations whose externalisation it had been built on. One of the most challenging aspects of these transformations is that they will require particularly far-reaching change to currently prevailing conceptions of masculinities.¹

2. Degrowth's lessons for the phaseout of hegemonic masculinities: (Re-)Production and Deprivileging

Although the degrowth spectrum has only recently begun explicitly engaging with masculinities to any significant extent (Hultman & Pulé, 2018; Pulé & Hultman, 2021; Salleh, 2017; Scholz & Heilmann, 2019; Smith Khanna, 2021), some of the considerations present in degrowth thinking seem to open up useful perspectives for thinking about the transformation of gender relations and masculinities when read from the appropriate angle. This, of course, requires a strong emphasis on feminist insights concerning the significance of care practices for the broader transformation of modes of production and life, as well as the social relations with nature in which these are embedded (Abazeri, 2022; Barca, 2020; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Eversberg, 2021; hooks, 2004).

In this vein, let us simply highlight here two important aspects of any transformation away from the hegemony of growth that are bound to have profound implications for the (gendered) ways in which subjects living through such transformations relate to themselves and the world. One of these aspects is to overcome the gendered division of labour by revaluing care work, the other is to conceive of degrowth as deprivileging or male depowerment.

On the one hand, as feminists have rightly insisted time and again, a crucial element of all degrowth thought must be a critique of the gendered division of labour and of the way in which the focus on economic growth devalues and renders invisible the socially necessary work of reproduction that constitutes the bulk of the 'iceberg' of any economy. This is one of the reasons why degrowth critique cannot restrict itself to questioning the logic of permanent

¹ These arguments are based on our reflections on the question of the post-growth and degrowth subject (Eversberg & Schmelzer 2017) and the experience of a participatory workshop at the 2018 International Degrowth Conference in Malmö.

quantitative expansion and simply call for its reversal. Rather, at a more fundamental level, what degrowth problematizes is the *qualitative* makeup of the mindsets and the technologies of power that enable modern capitalist societies to abstract from the concrete relations of care and the biological-material cycles of reproduction on which all human life depends. They make it possible in the first place to posit these basic (re)productivities as unquestioned ‘givens’ requiring no further consideration by those pursuing the ever further expansion of so-called ‘productive’ economic activity. It is precisely the separations between ‘production’ and ‘reproduction’, ‘public’ and ‘private’ and ‘male’ ‘gainful’ work and ‘female’ care work, which a feminist degrowth critique exposes as basic preconditions for the implementation of an abstract logic of increase. This implies that it is not simply the basic calculative logic of the capitalist economy, but also a specific, historically *bourgeois* conception of (male) subjectivity and gender relations as well as relationships with nature that needs to be fundamentally changed (Barca, 2020; Kothari et al., 2019; Schmelzer et al., 2022).

And secondly, we argue that degrowth ought to be understood as a movement for global ecological justice that seeks to overcome the inequalities associated with a world system that creates exclusive affluence at the centres, where the benefits of the imperial mode of living concentrate, while appropriating labour and resources from the global poor and externalising its costs (Brand & Wissen, 2021; Lessenich, 2019). In this regard, and against the background of our own research, degrowth can be seen as starting from the positionality of certain social groups within affluent Northern societies who reflexively gain insight into their own privileged status and involvement in the imperial mode of living and who turn to self-transformation as a starting point for much more comprehensive and systemic societal change (Eversberg & Schmelzer 2018; Eversberg 2017). From this sociological perspective, degrowth appears at least in part as a self-critical movement of parts of the young, highly mobile educational elites of European societies – in a way: an inherent counter-tendency of flexible capitalism. If we take this into account, the concerns with self-problematization and self-restraint in the context of the imperial mode of living that have often been regarded weaknesses of the degrowth perspective (see, for example, Huber, 2022) do indeed rightly play a central role. Of course, this is linked to and includes (cis-, heterosexual, white) male privileges – as is particularly obvious with regard to the ‘masculine’ obsession with fast mobility, high-tech or other forms of particularly destructive behaviour. In a way, this is also relevant to the

degrowth community itself: only 43 percent of respondents to a survey at the 2014 international degrowth conference identified as male, and men were particularly overrepresented among those parts of the 'degrowth spectrum' that were open to ideas of ecological modernization, technologically driven transformations or to political top-down solutions and to privileging theory over practice (Eversberg & Schmelzer 2018).

The tendency toward reflexivity and empathetic consideration of the consequences of one's own life for others is itself a largely gendered disposition: It is not just *any* segment of the privileged parts of society that turns reflexive, but specifically those who, although privileged in some respects, are also involved with the (re)productive work of dealing with some of the burdens and dependencies externalized by the imperial mode of living. Degrowth is typically supported by people working in (or studying for) educational, cultural and social professions (Eversberg, 2015) – and among these the proportion of women is far above average. That is, the entrenched gendered division of labour as a specific structural dimension of modern capitalist societies must be a prime object of any degrowth transformation, and it will be a particularly challenging task to come up with viable paths of a politics of *male* deprivileging or of intentional and targeted *male* depowerment (Elliott, 2016). Here, too, conscious self-reflection among some of the privileged is a necessary starting point for ideas and practical experiences from which visions of alternatives may arise. But politically agreed, structurally promoted changes to the division of labour at the societal scale will ultimately be indispensable for actually challenging the prevailing order.

3. The relational subject

In addition to the inevitable practical self-contradictions of such a politics of self-deprivileging, it also seems likely to suffer from some rather fundamental motivational problems: why should people actively commit themselves to a type of social change that explicitly promises them losses in material affluence and opportunities – even if those losses are recognized as morally justified? The degrowth answer would of course be that posing the question this way is itself an expression of the growth-based imaginary that needs to be overcome. A common argument in second-wave feminism was that ending patriarchy would free not only women but also men, because they too are restricted, constrained and limited in their capacities by patriarchal relations. The degrowth argument about deprivileging is akin to this point: The

fixation on growth restrains the capacities of all by forcing them to direct their activities at contributing to economic expansion, and therefore, despite the enormous differences in the kinds and extent of hardship and suffering this imposes, there is on some level a common interest of *all* in the human emancipation that liberation from the growth imperative offers. It would therefore be a misconstrual to perceive degrowth as calling for individual renunciation or personal austerity: What it promotes is not the conception of a 'reductive self' that is primarily negatively determined, but a positive, concrete-utopian impulse to invent new forms of practices and modes of existence, converging on what we think is more adequately described in terms of a 'relational self', a subject defined by the wealth of the ties with others and with nature that it is embedded in. Instead of the growth subject that aims at 'higher, faster, further', degrowth subjectivities revolve around the motto 'Moins de biens, plus de liens' (less things, more relations).

From the dead ends that the androcentric Promethean individualism of modernity has run into, the degrowth movement has learned to question central aspects of modernity – not in order to end it, but rather to push it beyond itself by once again including the rich multitude of possible social and socio-natural relations that escalatory modernism had systematically excluded. The gendered implications, however, have yet to be understood theoretically and, above all, anchored in movement politics. Here, let us just mention three aspects of what such as positive conception of degrowth subjectivity may entail: *relationality*, *conviviality* and *resonance*. Rather than individualistic with regard to others and nature, degrowth subjectivities need to be relational; instead of constant increases in 'world reach', the establishment of fewer, but stable 'axes of resonance' would be sought; and instead of technologically supported individual sovereignty, conviviality could be a practical mode of achieving this goal. We call this the 'relational self'.

Relationality

Firstly, degrowth subjectivities are not individualistic, but relational. The feminist degrowth debate and related discourses (Abazeri, 2022; Jax et al., 2018; Rendueles, 2017) argue for a conception of selfhood founded on the existential condition of being fundamentally dependent on others and on nature, exposing growth societies' androcentric ideal of individual autonomy as a hollow fiction. This is not about abandoning the ideal of autonomy,

but about redefining it as a capacity for collective self-determination that is always already social, because it is based on mutual concern and access to limited, shared resources (Asara et al., 2013; Kallis et al., 2020; Schmelzer et al., 2022).

The individualist illusion is built on the separation and hierarchization, constitutive of modern capitalist societalization, between a 'male' public and a feminised private sphere as well as between 'productive' work performed by ostensible individuals in the former and the caring, relational labour that is indispensable to their performances, but invisibilised and devalued by being relegated to the latter (Barca, 2020; Dengler & Strunk, 2018). Relational selfhood, in contrast, is founded on the rejection of that separation. It constitutes itself based on the awareness of these fundamental interdependencies as conditions of one's own life that can be creatively shaped, but not denied. And it defines itself through its links with others, experienced in practices of giving care as well as of receiving it. This includes recognizing the obligations that come with mutual dependence. Regarding masculinities, the crucial challenge here lies less in fostering the integration of active caring into male subjectivities than in accepting and affirming one's own *dependence* on care. For it is this that is most fundamentally incompatible with modern masculine subject constructions, insofar as it represents their very externalised and repressed 'Other'. We will return to this at the end.

Conviviality

The constitutive relationality of degrowth subjectivities sets them apart from the modern, originally patriarchal illusion of an individuality in total separation and independence from others. Conviviality, its closely related second aspect, specifies the logic of how degrowth subjects experience and shape their relational embeddedness in the socio-natural world. It counters the deeply ingrained aspiration of growth subjects to not only set themselves apart from the world, but also assert a position of sovereign control and dominance vis-à-vis other people and the extra-human by way of instrumentally deploying personally controlled resources to personally defined ends. Degrowth subjects are not consumers or investors seeking to maximise their present or future utility or enjoyment by allocating whatever means are at their disposal in line with their preferences. Rather, they can derive contentment directly from practices of determining and catering to shared needs and desires together with others in an equitable and sustainable manner. In accordance with these requirements,

relational subjects reject the illusion of immortality implicit to every accumulative or speculative practice as part of unrealistic male fantasies of omnipotence.

This convivial dimension requires the cultivation of a different economy of personal desire. Part of a global consciousness as co-inhabitants of the world is the ability to cultivate needs and desires in mutual, socio-ecologically embedded processes, rather than experiencing personal desire as an urgent longing for goods and experiences that can only be catered to by exerting control over others and instrumentalizing nature. Again, this is a gendered form of emancipation – it is much harder to achieve for those who have internalised the typically male experience of always being able to get what you want. This is probably particularly relevant with respect to technology. When Ivan Illich (1973) called for technologies to be ‘tools for conviviality’, his concern was with a critical analysis of the social function and ecological consequences of specific technologies. Degrowth implies pushing back technologies that afford individuals experiences of enjoyment, comfort and control, but whose functioning requires and deepens domination and ecological destruction. Rather, the criteria for convivial technologies are whether they can be employed in ways that are truly sustainable and globally just, democratically controlled, low risk and conducive to autonomy (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Engaging in the social processes of negotiation and self-limitation that this entails requires abandoning the approach to technology as a means for feeling powerful and exerting control that constitutes a core component of hegemonic masculinity in capitalist societies – as epitomised by large-scale industrial geoengineering or rich men’s competitive missions to colonise Mars.

Resonance

Instead of the quantitative orientation towards maximum 'world reach' (Rosa, 2019), towards ever more and greater possibilities for action and experience that can ultimately only be had at the expense of others, degrowth calls for a different, qualitative criterion for what sorts of relations and shared experiences can constitute a 'good' life. In combination with relationality and conviviality, Hartmut Rosa's (2019) notion of *resonance* seems helpful here, as referring to a quality of positive experiences of mutuality and connection. Experiencing resonance is not per se dependent on energy consumption, resource use or instrumental power over others – it can be experienced with very simple means and in all sorts of environments, and it is all the more probable when experiences are sought for intrinsic rather than extrinsic motives, i.e., when they are not an object of competition.

Exiting the escalatory logic requires a practical idea of *enough*, or a criterion of *sufficiency*. Conceived in terms of resonance, satisfaction is itself something that there can be *more than enough* of: too many emotional experiences of connectedness overwhelm and numb the senses, thus negating themselves as such. For the relational self, establishing a limited number of stable and fulfilling 'axes of resonance' (Rosa, 2019) along one's social and socio-natural relations is the key to a satisfying life in an autonomy that is both at peace with dependence and mortality, as well as capable of being permanently generalised globally in its socio-ecological consequences. In short: a good life. For the relational self, the boundedness of the personal option space does not have to appear as a loss but can also be desired as a commandment of solidarity. It is therefore not about a 'return' to pre-modern ways of life, it does not follow a conservative, particularistic logic, but an inclusive and plural universalism, which is itself inevitably premised on the very logic of modernity that it wants to move beyond.

4. Conclusion

One of the greatest and most underestimated challenges to degrowth transformations will lie in how to foster the changes in subjectivities and processes of subjectivation that these entail – and particularly challenging will be the transformations of growth-dependent masculinities. To give just a few initial pointers on what this might entail, we have suggested three core dimensions of potential degrowth subjectivities: relationality, conviviality and resonance. Of

course, all three of these dimensions can be strengthened and enabled by socio-political changes often discussed in the degrowth spectrum, including the radical shortening of working hours for all and the breaking up of gender-specific patterns of division of labour. Overcoming the 'male breadwinner' model of the family in favour of a more balanced division of labour and redefining work and the status of employment are key. In fact, they are the very conditions for creating the possibility for genuine time prosperity and stable axes of resonance in all spheres of life – beyond coercion stress, and competitive pressure. Such reforms in the field of work are key to transforming masculinities in the transition beyond growth because they enable different and more diverse experiences and can thus help in establishing connectedness and mutual dependence rather than separateness and supposed independence as a basis of subjectivity.

In conclusion, let us offer one further reflection on the relevance of care as a key field of such transformed experience. For the relational subject, notions and practices of care – which androcentric growth subjectivity has displaced as its constitutive outside – undoubtedly play a central role. In terms of transforming masculinities, assuming responsibility for caring relationships and learning to practically live 'caring masculinities' (Elliott, 2016; see also Hultman & Pulé, 2018) is certainly crucial. But as great an emancipatory progress the establishment of such caring masculinities would undoubtedly be, as practices and self-conceptions of active caring they do not necessarily touch on the very fundamental taboo of male, growth-oriented self-relations, namely the reality of one's own dependence and mortality. In addition to 'caring masculinity', therefore, the aspect of 'needy masculinity', so far perceived as more of a deficiency, might have its own transformative potentials (see also Kastein, 2019). For needing others, needing care, is the real experiential core of that inescapable human condition that all hegemonic masculinities have been forged to ward off with all their might, and which they again and again symbolically negate by attempting to assert dominance using all kinds of technical prostheses.

Experiencing oneself as passive, as dependent, as *needy* (rather than desiring), is perhaps the strongest, and therefore most powerfully repressed, antithesis to a masculine identity. While caring masculinities, such as positive concepts of emancipatory fatherhood, still allow the male subject to experience himself as active, as influential, as a force shaping the world, the

conscious experience of existential dependence – as symbolically purged from boys’ identities in rites of passage to manhood and hitherto experienced by most men only in situations of acute illness or in old age – calls masculinity as such into question in a very practical and very effective way. It is precisely because ‘passive masculinity’ is an oxymoron against the given subject-historical background that such experiences are so central. And they are constitutively part of human existence, merely cut off from becoming part of the constitution of masculine subjectivity by a multi-layered protective shield of material, discursive, social and mental technologies. Bringing passive masculinities and relational subjectivities to the surface may be one of the keys to the truly profound transformations of self-relations that are necessary, especially in the context of debates on degrowth. They could seriously destabilise the boundaries of what would still be adequately described as ‘masculine’.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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