



ESSAY

Why are feminist perspectives, analyses, and actions vital to degrowth?

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Feminist analyses of the historical dynamics of gender systems are fundamental to the work of challenging growth-driven political economies, and of designing more equitable and balanced ecosocial systems. Feminist theories and methods that acknowledge and support diverse voices, knowledges, and practices are vital resources for building on heterodox degrowth movements. In dialogue with postcolonial, decolonial, indigenous, and anti-racist efforts, intersectional feminisms have been unlearning and disrupting conventional politics of knowing and action in ways that help forge more inclusive understandings and applications necessary for degrowth futures.

With the purpose of highlighting advances on these three fronts, this essay was co-written by participants in the Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA), an inclusive network of activists and scholars that has supported an array of collaborative initiatives. FaDA's birthplace was the 5th International Conference on Degrowth in Budapest in 2016, where a surprisingly large turnout for the roundtable *Degrowth and feminism(s): Conflicts, intersections, and convergences between two radical political movements* motivated the establishment of the FaDA mailing list, our main means of communication. FaDA participation reflects the diversity of degrowth advocates in general: a 2017 survey (Iserlohn, 2018) revealed that members bring varying activist, academic, household, and professional experiences from wide-ranging contexts around the world. This essay is illuminated with examples from our own journeys toward more inclusive and mutual learning across languages, nationalities, cultures, gender identities, and time zones, all challenges engaged in the co-writing process. We celebrate the launching of the journal *Degrowth* as a convivial space for generating and exploring knowledge and practice from diverse perspectives. And we push the journal to realize its tremendous potential to foster synergies around feminisms and degrowth. The main part of this text explores powerful contributions from feminist thought and practice. We then identify a set of important issues and approaches advanced by feminisms and degrowth scholarship, and point to potential for further work along these lines. Our conclusions draw on histories of movement-building across diverse feminisms worldwide to strategize ways to strengthen degrowth alliances toward shared goals of emancipatory ecosocial transformation.

1. Marginalizing exclusions or fertile synergies?

Widespread consensus that degrowth horizons are broadened by the celebration of plural knowledges, practices, and worldviews coexists in tension with dynamics that have worked to empower and publicize certain strands of degrowth, while obscuring others.

In recent decades, some scholars have disseminated degrowth research and analyses in scholarly books and in journals like *Ecological Economics* and the *Journal of Cleaner Production*. This work has been essential to increasing visibility and advancing the shared cause. Intellectual genealogies and literature reviews have often portrayed these authors,

predominantly European men, as the main (or only) founding fathers and protagonists of degrowth, using this single strand to represent all degrowth thought and action.

Meanwhile, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist voices from many parts of the world have been contributing strongly to degrowth conversations and directions through conferences, graduate courses, publications, and other initiatives. They have worked to co-construct degrowth communities and movements, and have influenced degrowth visions, including conceptualizations and embodiments of pluriversality. Amid growing appreciation of the generative force of these essential strands, numerous scholars have raised questions about why feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist voices are under- or misrepresented in so many characterizations of degrowth (e.g. Andreucci & Engel-Di Mauro, 2019; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Gregoratti & Raphael, 2019; Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019; Richter, 2022; Schulken et al., 2022).

Rather than call out specific authors who propagate limited and limiting portrayals of degrowth, we point here to one public representation of the field. At 10,650 words and 132 sources, the Wikipedia entry on degrowth is remarkably long at the time of this writing (22 May, 2022). Equally remarkable is its underrepresentation of the feminist contributions that have shaped degrowth thought and practice—contributions partially reflected in the 70 sources cited in this essay in *Degrowth*. Wiki entries are constantly evolving, and some time before our May 2022 reading, editors added a section on “feminism” and a section on “intersectional feminism.” Curiously, however, combined these sections only mention three papers from the wealth of feminist degrowth work that has burgeoned in the 21st century. The limitation of nearly all citations to publications from the 1980s and 1990s makes it seem as if feminism was something done only by earlier generations and suggests that current feminisms are not actively contributing to degrowth thought and praxis.

How has one strand of degrowth become a proxy for the much broader whole? Can future horizons be enriched by more sincere and public engagement with contributions from feminist political ecology, feminist ecological economics, feminist economics, feminist new materialism, ecofeminisms, postcolonial feminisms, decolonial feminisms, communitarian

feminisms, Black feminisms, indigenous feminisms, queer feminisms, anarcha-feminisms, anti-racist feminisms, among others?

2. Power of feminisms and degrowth synergies

Feminist research and analysis has contributed to understanding the roles that historically specific gender systems have played in facilitating growth, revealing that the growth paradigm is not merely a dynamic that drives production and consumption on local and global scales, but to that end also tangles deeply with gendered norms, practices, and subjectivities. This first contribution of feminist studies strengthens degrowth capacities to imagine and to adapt gender systems that support different paths. Human biology, sociocultural practice, and changing environments continually interact to create astonishingly diverse ways of being human. Gender and queer studies show how diversity within and among societies is essential to vitality and adaptation in human history, and also reveal how currently dominant systems that differentiate people in hierarchical and exploitative ways limit progress towards goals of care and equitable wellbeing.

The rise of capitalism and fossil-fueled industrial technologies was enabled by the establishment of violent colonial and racial systems that mobilized war and commerce to expropriate Indigenous Peoples' lands, enslave labor, and harness diverse local gender systems to increase productivity and profit. Colonial capitalist restructuring of gender norms and identities accompanied shifts in human ecological relations involving the separation of economic production from ecosocial reproduction, and the ascendance of a new ideology that dualistically separated culture from nature, which was portrayed as a mechanism and passive resource (Merchant, 1990).

The separation of production, which came to be associated with masculinity, from reproduction, associated with femininity, interacted with other historical changes. These included adaptations of inherited patriarchal social relations, new kinds of colonizing states, and expansion of long-distance trade. All worked together to mobilize old and new forms of coercion and exploitation of labor and other natural resources.

The emergence and establishment of this globalizing gendered and racial capitalist society has depended on the periodic expansion and intensification of its regimes of accumulation, and on new masculinities and femininities through which crises in the domain of production are externalized into the domain of reproduction (Federici, 2004, 2021; Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2000; Robinson, 2020).

State command and control over sexuality and reproduction, witch-hunts, new misogyny among guilds, merchant exploitation through the putting out system, transatlantic slave trade, plantation slavery, and forced labor in fleets and mines operated together to develop interlocking systems of oppression on global scales. The gendered and racialized class hierarchies of those systems persist to this day, notably in the continued subalternization of the domain of social reproduction. In contexts of modernity, thought and discourse about race, gender, and sexuality became characterized by categorical, dichotomous, and hierarchical forms that promote the dehumanization of women's and men's bodies, especially in the global south (Lugones, 2010). This system of oppression linked subordinate forms of masculinity with dangerous and degrading labor, while linking femininity with the unpaid work of reproducing socialized laborers and regenerating labor capacities through nourishment, nurture, and emotional care. At the same time, a political affiliation between some masculinities and the modernizing culture of racial capitalism has worked to sustain a "patriarchy of the wage" (Federici, 2021). Challenging the growth imperative crucially involves curbing the reproduction of masculinities and femininities that are subjected to and subjectified by this imperative. Creating degrowth futures depends crucially on feminist innovation, retrieval, and adaptation of other gendered ecologies.

A second powerful contribution from feminisms are methods and theories that acknowledge and support diverse voices, knowledges, and practices. People in different positions and contexts are exploring degrowth as a field of research, a network of social movements, a community of scholar-activists, a way of life, or a vision for desirable futures. An even broader range of people and movements may contribute to—and benefit from—degrowth transitions. As Patricia E. Perkins (2010, p. 5) makes clear, "Degrowth needs to include people from a diversity of gender, race, class, and geographic perspectives FROM THE START [sic] in order to build a strong, resilient, and politically-dynamic framework for eco-socio-political change." Yet, we face powerful legacies of division and exclusion.

In contemporary societies, including in natural and social sciences, power operates through historically specific hierarchical binaries that have been disseminated with colonial capitalism and globalization, and have been internalized (or resisted) in various ways around the world. Superiority and domination of humans over other nature have been conceptually and structurally interconnected with colonizer over colonized, white over non-white, man over woman, hetero-normative over queer, capitalist over worker, and nation-state over community. Structures and institutions through which these divisions are sustained and reproduced work in complex ways to frustrate attempts at mutually fruitful relationships and alliances across differences.

Emerging at the confluence of critiques of humans-over-nature and critiques of colonizer-over-colonized, conversations about degrowth offer ways towards deeper interrogation of these historical hierarchies. Since its earliest articulations (Gorz, 1980; Illich, 1974; Latouche, 1986), degrowth diverged from mainstream development and environmental stances by seeking ways for “developed” societies, positioned as colonizers, to reduce negative impacts on other people and environments, starting with efforts to dismantle ideologies of the growth imperative. Yet, societal projects based on downscaling growth and global exploitation, even those that prioritize conviviality and cooperation, do not guarantee relations free of sexism, racism, and other forms of exploitation and oppression.

For example, although racism has been explicitly recognized by environmental justice scholars and activists, serious work still needs to be done on the roles that racialization and white privilege play in dynamics that drive growth, as well as in those that may support just and equitable degrowth (Tyberg, 2020). Some critical awareness is activated via alliances with anti-colonial, anti-racist, ecofeminist, and other movements that address interconnected hierarchies. However, powerful institutions for production and dissemination of knowledge have been operating in ways that construe these perspectives as less valid than mainstream science and marginalize their topics and analyses as irrelevant to economic and ecological knowledge.

These structural legacies continue to limit efforts to bring voices and visions together towards emancipatory ecosocial transformation. There is no doubt that diversifying degrowth movements is an important means towards this end. But, as the network Diversifying and Decolonizing Economics (d-econ) reminds us, diversifying is not the same as decolonizing. While the former is important for epistemic justice and likely to bring other questions and perspectives to the table, decolonization and decoloniality furthermore require collective unlearning of Eurocentric and androcentric knowledges and practices, and the provision of fertile soil in which new collaborative knowledges and practices can flourish. In this regard, histories of feminist solidarity and movement building, especially coordinating local struggles transnationally (e.g., on issues of food, land, development dispossession, and anti-war/peace), offer important lessons for degrowth scholarship and activism.

A third power of synergies among feminisms and degrowth lies in the potential for creating new spaces and modes of knowledge production. Degrowth and feminist proponents share an appreciation of different ways of learning and kinds of understanding that go beyond conventional western scientific approaches; some of many journeys on this front are described in “Pluriversal learning: pathways toward a world of many worlds” (Paulson, 2018).

Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance is a living example of experimentation with forms of knowledge production that incorporates diverse positions and perspectives. Venturing beyond topics usually associated with feminism, FaDA members have organized and joined workshops and panels at international conferences on degrowth, ecological economics, anthropology, and other subjects, and provided respective groups with guidelines for feminist conference organizing.

Continuous experimentation with self-organized collective projects is exemplified by processes in March and April 2020, when FaDA channeled spontaneous interaction to understand and respond to situations provoked by the coronavirus. Conversation among more than 40 participants from five continents led to collaborative writing of two statements: “Feminist degrowth reflections on COVID-19 and the Politics of Social Reproduction” (FaDA 2020a) and “Collaborative Feminist Degrowth: Pandemic as an Opening for a Care-Full Radical Transformation” (FaDA 2020b). Commitment to include a wide variety of interlocutors in the

conversation inspired translations of the messages into Finnish, German, Greek, Italian, Spanish, and Turkish. The call for a “Care-full radical transformation” begins: “The crisis we face as a global community must be understood not only as a public health crisis, or as an economic crisis of the capitalist mode of production, but also, fundamentally, as a crisis of the reproduction of life. In this sense, it is a crisis of care: the work of caring for humans, non-humans, and the shared biosphere.”

Recent flourishing of feminist degrowth is contributing to more comprehensive origin stories by digging for obscured feminist roots of degrowth and is fostering convergences of perspectives and creative alliances. In light of these successes, and despite them, FaDA members continue to struggle with unlearning those values, assumptions, and structures that hinder feminist-informed degrowth, including racist, colonialist, hetero-patriarchal, speciesist, ableist, and classist undercurrents that unconsciously guide all of our thinking and practice.

Although transdisciplinary research has long worked toward alignment between knowledge and practice (Gibbons, 1999), it is still a struggle to bridge knowledge systems in ways that do not reinforce hegemonic positivist academia, epicenter of the colonial system (Grosfoguel, 2008). Feminisms and degrowth motivate complementary efforts to move away from hierarchical relations and systems of knowledge that have constituted the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2000).

A fundamental strategy for FaDA has been to create commons for unlearning, learning, and writing. This is facilitated by ongoing open FaDA meetings and topical events, as well as virtual check-ins on the well-being of members, and live gatherings like a 2022 workshop that brought 60 participants from a dozen countries to Lund, Sweden, to explore feminisms and degrowth horizons. The toolkit of the degrowth movement can be fortified with similar commoning processes.

Projects such as this essay, co-written by seven participants from nearly as many countries, have generated confusions, unexpected doubts, and painful misunderstandings that prevent linear progress. Moving toward communal forms of intellectual work, we have come to

appreciate ways in which more difficult journeys can be more fruitful, and to trust the process of writing as a goal and reward in itself. The constitution of text through the entanglement of our varied writings/lines/thoughts/onto-epistemologies/desires forges communal processes of "becoming" that portray experiences of "betweenness" (Sonetti-González et al., forthcoming). In sum, even as collaboration across differences multiplies confusions and changes, it has also multiplied learning and unlearning in processes that have become vital for us.

3. Issues and approaches that feminisms and degrowth synergy is already advancing and can further strengthen

With the aim of motivating readers to explore opportunities toward further synergies, we provide here a non-comprehensive glimpse of the rich work that has been published in many languages and diverse media around selected issues in feminisms and degrowth. FaDA collaborators are working on a longer article that will present and reflect on a broader range of literature.

- **Care economies, commoning care, caring masculinities, and interspecies care** (Aulenbacher & Riegraf, 2018; Borowy & Aillon, 2017; D'Alisa & Catteano, 2013; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Paulson et al., 2022(a); Paulson et al., 2022(b)\; Tummers & MacGregor, 2019; Winker, 2015)
- **Crises (war, anthropocene, COVID)** (Bahn, Cohen & Rodgers, 2020; Bock, 2021; FaDA, 2020a; FaDA, 2020b; Raworth, 2014; Riquito, 2021; Paulson, 2022; Paulson, 2020)
- **Decolonial, intersectional, and global south approaches** (Abazeri, 2022; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019, Mehta & Harcourt, 2021; Nirmal & Rocheleau, 2019; Paulson, 2021; Pietilä, 2006, Salleh, 2020; Svampa, 2015)
- **Design, technology, and practical innovations** (Bell et al., 2020; Gaziulusoy & Houtbeckers, 2018; Houtbeckers & Gaziulusoy, 2019; Kawgan-Kagan, 2015; Paulson, 2022; White, 2020)
- **Ecofeminisms** (Pérez Orozco & Mason-Deese, 2022; Perkins, 2019; Picardi et al., 2022; Saave, 2022; Salleh, 2017)

- **Gender and political economic systems** (Andreucci et al., 2019; Akbulut, 2021; Barca et al., 2019; Gregoratti & Raphael, 2019)
- **Programs and policies (basic income, wages for housework, green new deals, UN)** (Katada, 2012; Paulson & Paulson-Smith, 2021; Piccardi & Barca, 2022; Schulz, 2017; Zelleke, 2021)
- **Social reproduction, labor, and invisible economy** (Barca, 2019; Bauhardt, 2014; Dengler & Strunk 2018; Salleh, 2017; Saave-Harnack, Dengler & Muraca, 2019; Saave & Muraca, 2021)
- **Societal transformations, climate justice, and utopias** (Aulenbacher & Riegraf, 2018; Andreucci & Engel-Di Mauro, 2019; Akbulut, 2021; Barca, Chertkovskaya & Paulsson, 2019; Pérez-Orozco & Mason-Deese, 2022; Perkins, 2019; Smith Khanna, 2021; Solón, 2019; Winker, 2015)

4. Conclusion

In this essay, we showed three central strategies to mobilize synergies among feminisms and degrowth toward shared purposes of emancipatory transformation. The first strategy is to apply understandings of the historical dynamics of gender systems to challenge growth-driven political economies and to build more equitable and balanced social ecologies. The second is to support diverse voices, knowledges, and practices as vital resources for strengthening degrowth thought and action. And the third is to unlearn conventional politics of knowledge and action, while generating new understandings and applications through feminist epistemological interventions. All are advanced through alliances including postcolonial, indigenous, and intersectional efforts. Degrowth movements will benefit from placing those strategies at the core of studies and policies oriented to forging futures that are not only environmentally sound, but also thriving and inclusive.

Feminist analyses illuminate hierarchical sociocultural systems and narratives that divide and polarize potential allies, heighten awareness of relative positioning and power within these systems, and contextualize diverse pathways and perspectives. FaDA promotes strategic alliances that explicitly recognize the class, gender, colonial, and ethno-racial systems that categorize people into unequal relationships, and care-fully attend to ways in which these

systems constrain and contaminate attempts at alliance-building. These contributions can be multiplied via tangible degrowth-wide support for learning from these histories, and for feminist movement building, especially regarding the coordination of local struggles transnationally.

Degrowth advocates agree that transformation towards worlds that prioritize good living for all will require us to find points of convergence and to activate synergies among diverse positions and purposes; feminist degrowth activism and scholarships have prepared this ground. Building more explicit and fruitful alliances requires courageous moves to ally with diverse feminisms, and to create new narratives that portray “degrowth as if feminists and feminism mattered” (Gregoratti & Raphael, 2019, p. 85). By providing systematic space to develop synergies and alliances discussed here, and by inviting feminist-informed contributions, *Degrowth* as a journal facilitates and fuels this process.

Conflict of interest

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The Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA) is an inclusive network of academics, activists, and practitioners working to foster dialogue between feminists and degrowth proponents and to integrate gender analysis and reasonings into degrowth activism and scholarship.