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Degrowth? How About Some “De-alienation”?

*Leigh Brownhill, Terisa E. Turner & Wahu Kaara**

As participants in the ecofeminist, ecosocialist international movement, we have been keenly aware of the repudiation of “growth at all costs,” especially within the climate justice sections of that movement. In the late 1980s, with the publication of her book *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, Marilyn Waring popularized quality of life indicators instead of monetized exchanges (Gross Domestic Product, GDP) as (gender-sensitive) measures of progress. Repudiations of growth as the holy grail have multiplied since. For instance, the 18 working group reports that came out of the April 2010 Cochabamba conference on climate change and the rights of Mother Earth are heavily inflected with the rejection of over-consumption, of a way of life that equates improvement with “more-more-more,” and especially of excessive extraction of fossil fuels and uranium.

While we applaud the alternative affirmation of “living well” (*vivir bien*) to replace the quantity-focused “higher standard of living” through capitalist growth, we feel ill at ease with what seems to be a monolithic fixation on hyper-consumerism, with very little comment about production, power relations, and a transformation in all our relations both with each other and with our natural world.

Then we came upon the degrowth advocates, some of whom were voices behind the Cochabamba reports and other interventions. They seemed detached from social struggle, prone to over-generalizing (surely we want more food for the starving and less militarism), and disconnected from historical understandings.

We know of no instance of policy-directed “degrowth” under capitalism. Instead, greenhouse gas emissions have declined only with crisis-driven economic recession (e.g., in Russia and the U.K.), volcanic ash-induced bans on air transport, or as a result of popular uprisings that halted business as usual, most recently in 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East.

Our response is that degrowth is much too little too late. Along with the 99 percent in the Occupy the World movement of movements, we aspire to a whole new kind of humanity, an Earth-centric humanization that, with the Zapatistas, insists on Everything for Everyone!

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The Principles of Degrowth, Alienation and De-alienation

Degrowth	Alienation	De-alienation
Latouche’s eight Rs	Marx’s alienation	Individual and social
<p><i>The political project of a concrete utopia for degrowth:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Re-valuation ● Reconceptualization ● Reconstruction ● Relocalization ● Redistribution ● Reduction ● Re-use ● Recycling 	<p><i>Alienation or estrangement of laboring people from:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Products of labor and the natural world ● The labor process ● Species-being (one’s body, one’s spiritual life and external nature) ● Other humans 	<p><i>“De-alienating” or reversing estrangement by:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Re-integrating with others ● Re-conceiving ourselves as individuals as part of the universal ● Returning control over processes of production to producers ● Regaining dominion over the products of labor

Source: Brownhill and Turner

The degrowth principles speak of a reconceptualization of the *idea* of capital, and suggest steady-state-like regulation of everyday practices. What these principles do not sufficiently emphasize is that “the political project of a concrete utopia for degrowth” necessarily entails a reconceptualization of the *idea* of the commons and, further, a re-actualization of actual commoning. We present a schema for examining processes by which commoning might be reconceived and its ongoing reinvention illuminated and assessed. The Occupy Everywhere movement (and its Arab revolution and myriad other antecedents) shows how the *idea* of the commons is being utilized to reconceive the *practice* of democracy in horizontal, egalitarian social relations, and ecologically informed subsistence-oriented livelihood practices. This *idea* of the commons underlies ongoing local-to-planetary efforts to marshal power to reverse and un-do corporate enclosures.

Degrowth is an excellent remedy for the maladies of overconsumption. Northern consumers whose eyes are opening to the illogic of super-sized fries do require and will benefit from the concrete program of degrowth. Dropping over-consumption will clearly benefit people and the environment.

As a political project and platform for change, degrowth attracts some ecological economists and academics as well as social movements and political parties. But could it also be adopted by CEOs as part of a business plan, or as a new, more acceptable face of green capitalism for public relations purposes? In this case degrowth might present a means of constructing a leaner and meaner capitalism appropriate to the severe crisis period the world has been in since at least 2008. Degrowth can be seen as a brother to “green economics,” which is “green

capitalism.” It could be a “third way” for energy transition-oriented capitalists and their political allies. Or it might provide political rhetoric for the engineers of cutbacks in social services. The pro-austerity “share the pain” invocations to belt-tightening sound a lot like degrowth.

Bourgeois democracy has it that in the marketplace of ideas, capitalism is the best. So if some capitalists want to opt out of the system by “degrowing,” a market analyst might say, then other capitalists might well expand into the newly “available” markets and continue right on “growing,” like China, right across the southern hemisphere and the globe.

If its principles were seriously taken up and enacted by corporations, consumers, and governments, the resulting “degrown” economy could look like a smaller—but eerily familiar—version of what already exists. Couldn’t it turn out like an overweight gym-goer who works out and turns flabby abs into a trim sixpack stomach? Yes, he has “degrown” the fat, but he has gained muscle to become more fit and stronger than before. But we hardly need to resort to metaphors. As governments degrow social services, they expand repressive ones. As economic, political, and ecological crises unfold, we are witnessing increases in military spending around the world along with the proliferation of small arms.

Meanwhile, the same policy makers are on the winning side of the economics of structural adjustment, which appears now to be in full effect in the North. Simultaneously, their disastrous policies continue in the South to devastate human lives and the planet. So if our purpose is to reverse the universal social and ecological disasters of capitalism, is degrowth enough?

The worst humanitarian disaster in Africa registered in July 2011 at the border of Kenya and Somalia, “ground zero” for the fatal effects of 100 years of concerted corporate development and food policy. War and insecurity combined with drought to create famine and drive up starvation rates, which pushed Somali refugees into Kenya, in turn drawing kidnappers to poach tourists and foreign aid workers and spirit them over the border to Somalia, leading in mid-October to Kenyan military attacks on Somalia and threats of Al-Shabaab retribution against Kenyans.

In Kenya, then, where millions face emergency levels of hunger and starvation, war and “terrorism,” plus the buildup to a contentious 2012 election, degrowth takes on a hollow ring. Something else is required. Something that deals more deeply with the maladies of 21st century capitalism. After all, “growth” for capital in the region has been generated by and has resulted in the “enclosure” and “dispossession” of most Kenyans. While the East African famine of 2011 features drastic spikes in deathrates, in fact, chronic malnutrition and widespread everyday deprivation constitute a perpetual state of humanitarian disaster there (Brownhill 2009b).

Landlessness in Kenya, rooted in and maintained for the benefit of global corporate profit-taking, is the cause of the chronic hunger and malnutrition that stunts growth for a fifth of Kenyan children (resulting from the “ordinary” conditions imposed by IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs). In our view, the ordinary operations of capitalism in East Africa constitute a *de facto* crime against humanity.

What is needed to address this dire situation is not the taming and degrowth of the criminal circuits of capital but their wholesale replacement. With what? With more of the home-grown alternatives many local social movements have been engaged in building for two decades and more: dispossessed peoples’ reversal of enclosures of land and other resources, and their defense of existing and new commoning practices and social relations.

From this vantage point, the degrowth of capital is accomplished through the regrowth of commoning. It is emphasis on this expansion of commoning that characterizes East Africa’s already-existing transformational social movements. But this emphasis goes largely unnoted by the degrowthers thus far.

Since around 1990, Kenyans have been building social movements that, like their counterparts worldwide, press for tangible democracy. These movements do not look for “democracy” in elite competitive elections, but in universal citizen engagement in horizontal, participatory decision-making. Kenyans passed an historic milestone when a new people-positive constitution was affirmed by referendum in August 2010. The struggle to enact the constitution’s good provisions continues.

Across North Africa and the Middle East, peoples’ movements are challenging the powers of capitalist dictatorship. By September 2011, the movement extended further to Occupy Wall Street. This Occupy Together (Occupy Everywhere) movement of the 99 percenters has gone viral, resulting in a virtually global popular occupation of the commons (parks, squares, and streets) and seats of state, financial, and corporate power.

In light of such popular transformations, degrowth could provide important principles for defense of the commons. But this does not seem to be on the horizons of degrowth’s proponents. Note that the Occupy! trajectory of transformation, involving as it does the building of universal participatory democracy, introduces the questions of power and praxis on which the advocates of the degrowth route are notably reticent.

Our objective is to more seriously consider another route to overcoming the disasters of capitalism. For the sake of paralleling the tone and spirit of the term “degrowth,” we call it “de-alienation.” The term calls attention to the problem of “alienation”—from enclosure of land, productive processes, and products to the alienation of people from each other and from themselves—and the transformational

potential of subverting alienation. The discussion of “de-alienation,” and those critically engaged in it, brings us to the center of a perspective that is historically grounded, involves real world actors, and has at its core the exercise of power and counter power.

De-alienation is about action by the exploited and dispossessed, both waged and unwaged. In the face of enclosures by capitalists, those engaged in de-alienation un-enclose and re-establish commons. From four aspects of the process of alienation outlined by Marx, we derive four principles for undoing alienation. These principles are evident in already-existing social movements and social experiments (for local food, peace, and democratic transformation in North Africa, the Middle East, and worldwide).

Marx conceived of alienation or estrangement as the precursor to the formation of private property in the history of capitalism. From there we elicit the centrality of de-alienation to the process of overcoming the capital relation (the social power relation between exploiters and exploited). In a passage from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx summarized his many-sided understanding of alienation as dehumanization and the killing of nature, extending to the human body, as capitalists drive the process of primitive accumulation and ongoing exploitation:

We have considered the act of estranging practical human activity, labor, in two of its aspects. (1) The relation of the worker to the *product of labor* as an alien object exercising power over him. This relation is at the same time the relation to the sensuous external world, to the objects of nature as an alien world inimically opposed to him. (2) The relation of labor to the *act of production* within the *labor* process. This relation is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's *own* physical and mental energy, his personal life[—]or what is life other than activity[?]—as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him. Here we have *self-estrangement*, as previously we had the estrangement of the *thing*.

We have yet a third aspect of *estranged labor* to deduce from the two already considered.

Man is a species-being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species (his own as well as those of other things) [as his object], but—and this is only another way of expressing it—but also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a *universal* and therefore a free being.

... The consciousness which man has of his species is thus transformed by estrangement in such a way that species becomes for him a means.

Estranged labor turns thus:

(3) *Man's species-being*, both nature and his spiritual species property, into a being

alien to him, into a *means* of his *individual existence*. It estranges man's own body from him, as it does external nature and his spiritual essence, his *human* being. (4) An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species-being, is the *estrangement of man* from *man*. If man is confronted by himself, he is confronted by the *other* man. What applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labor and object of labor.

In fact, the proposition that man's species-nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man's essential nature (Marx 1978a, 74-75, 77).

If we engage in a gendered reading of Marx on alienation, we can appreciate the utter dehumanization in particular of women. Women have been witch-hunted and deprived of property, professions, and status in Europe (1450–1650). We have been colonized and enslaved in the global South. We have been reduced by relentless accumulation to labor power producers (woman as womb) under the thumb of husbands, religious hierarchies, and the state. In brief, we have been separated from the essential means of production and hence, “housewifized” or reduced to reliance on husbands and other disciplinarians for access to inadequate means of survival.

Given the gendered and ethnicized character of the class formations that arise in capital's processes of enclosure and alienation, it should not be surprising that the “most exploited” of the world's peoples are those who feature prominently among the “most advanced” peoples in terms of re-inventing the commons. Neither is it any coincidence that peoples who are still partially rooted in the pre-colonial commoning social relations of cooperation, ecological stewardship, and autonomous political organizing possess rich resources from which to draw in struggles to re-establish new commoning relations. De-alienation calls for the *replacement* of the capital relation with the recovery of the “species-being” and the re-invention of the “gendered commons” (Brownhill 2009a).

Marx continued:

... Through *estranged, alienated labor*, then, the worker produces the relationship to this labor of a man alien to labor and standing outside it. The relationship of the worker to labor engenders the relation to it of the capitalist, or whatever one chooses to call the master of labor. *Private property* is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labor*, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself.

Private property thus results by analysis from the concept of *alienated labor*—i.e., of *alienated man*, of estranged labor, of estranged life, of *estranged* man.

True, it is as a result of the *movement of private property* that we have obtained the

concept of *alienated labor* (of *alienated life*) from political economy. But on analysis of this concept it becomes clear that though private property appears to be the source, the cause of alienated labor, it is really its consequence, just as the gods *in the beginning* are not the cause but the effect of man's intellectual confusion. Later this relationship becomes reciprocal (Marx 1978a, 79).

Our understandings of Marx's four aspects of alienation are not reified readings of holy text. They are illuminated and reaffirmed in practice by the already-existing movements to reclaim the earthly commons, by the "principal" actors in the process of de-alienation. These movements are rooted locally and extend globally, and each has a rich history. Such movements in East Africa have a very long, strong, creative, and continuing history of self-organization for social reconstruction and transformation (Turner 1994; Brownhill 2009a).

In practical terms, then, for us de-alienation entails the exploited eliminating our exploited conditions by:

- Re-integrating with others, working collectively;
- Re-establishing the species-being and therein the recognition of one's inter-connection with all—other animate and inanimate beings;¹
- Returning control over processes of production to producers; and
- Regaining dominion over the products of our labor.

The Principals

Who are the principal actors in "degrowing" capitalism? It seems that capital, labor, and the state are all responsible for doing their part to make degrowth "work." In this regard, degrowth has a lot to offer as a bridge between oft-divided parties. On the other hand, the principal actors engaged in re-establishing commoning relations, as far as we have seen, are collective organizations, such as many in Kenya, that do not *degrow capital* so much as they *de-alienate labor*. Those who "common," or practice commoning relations of stewardship over their own labor and their still-existing common resources, retain specific forms of continuing practice, knowledge and power. This makes many African social movements (and those of many other indigenous peoples) potent sources of inspiration, information and direction for the global project of inventing 21st century commons.

¹"With the explicit understanding that we are ecological beings, that nature is the extension of our bodies, that nature has use and intrinsic value and therefore the living systems constituting Mother Earth have rights" (Morales 2011).

De-alienation begins socially and ends socially, while requiring the agency and diversity of every individual. Its means and ends are social. Rebuilding the social relations of commoning is achieved through unity and collectivity, which involves the reversal of atomized individualism. Collectivity entails the expansion of the notion of self—or the idea that the life of the single human being or family is an inextricable part of the planet-sized experience of humanity and all other animate and inanimate being, in its entirety. This notion gives expression to the reintegration of people with themselves, others, nature, and their spiritual lives—that is, with the *species-being*.

Earth is part of this eco-socialist, eco-feminist conception of the species-being. So much has the whole of nature become a part of this conception that there is, since the April 2010 Cochabamba, Bolivia world conference on climate change and the rights of Mother Earth, a growing movement to legislate binding Rights of Nature through the United Nations (Morales 2011).

We can see prefigurations of species-being's birth in the huge array of 21st century social movements networked into a global movement of movements (see, for example, Giacomini 2011). What is new in the 21st century, as compared to 1844, is the capacity for the exploited to communicate instantaneously on a global scale, and thereby to actually experience or recognize, in great “social waves,” the universal character of the exploitation and peoples' resistance against it and creativity beyond it. This reclamation of species being is, in other words, the class in itself becoming a class, globally, for itself.

If degrowth focuses on slowing the growth of capitalist dominion, de-alienation differs by focusing on the reconstruction of peoples' relationships with themselves, others, with the fruits of their labor, the labor process, and nature. And because the goal of this de-alienation activity is the recovery of the species-being, those involved in such activity do their best to replace the conditions under which private property is established and maintained with conditions suitable to collective stewardship. This makes de-alienation explicitly anti-capitalist and foregrounds the constructive processes (the intrinsic value accorded to creativity) amongst those engaged in what we would say is de-alienation.

Marx argued that estrangement of human from human was the last result of the previous forms of alienation of “man” from his means of survival. Racism, sexism, religious animosities, political fall-outs, turf wars, oil wars—all these are essential, key forms of strife that inform the class war between capitalists and commoners. Whatever keeps the exploited divided maintains for capitalists a tight-fisted grip on labor and the earthly commons. In turn, those who overcome division and build unity take crucial steps towards freeing that grip. The tremendous excitement generated by the Occupy Movement's slogan “We are the 99 percent” testifies to the universal recognition of the liberating potential of unity.

What is helping humanity deal with the self-produced divisions fomented among us? How do we build unity? And how are we using that unity to take the next steps—that is, to reclaim both the products and processes of production and our own humanity in a context in which nature has intrinsic value and rights?

The human condition is marked by some startling universal tendencies. These range from exposure to manmade disaster (e.g., *E. coli*, nuclear fallout, climate chaos) to market crunches (e.g., oil, food, housing). Systemic crisis is recognized by the Occupy the World movement as endemic, non-reformable, and necessitating system change. An October 2011 U.S. poll found a huge majority in support of the Occupy movement and an astonishing 49 percent in favor of socialism over capitalism (Milne 2011).

The problem with trying to degrow the economy without simultaneously engaging in de-alienation is that private property remains private, and therefore alienation continues. Marx and Engels in *The Holy Family* pointed to the positive and negative sides of alienation. One class seeks its continuation, the other its cessation:

Private property as private property, as wealth, is compelled to preserve *its own existence* and thereby the existence of its opposite, the proletariat. This is the *positive* side of the antagonism, private property satisfied with itself.

The proletariat, on the other hand, is compelled to abolish itself and thereby its conditioning opposite—private property—which makes it a proletariat. This is the *negative* side of the antagonism, its disturbance within itself, private property abolished and in the process of abolishing itself.

The possessing class and the proletarian class represent one and the same human self-alienation. But the former feels satisfied and affirmed in this self-alienation, experiences the alienation as a sign *of its own power*, and possesses in it the *appearance* of a human existence. The latter, however, feels destroyed in this alienation, seeing in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence. To use Hegel's expression, this class is, within depravity, an *indignation* against this depravity, an indignation necessarily aroused in this class by the contradiction between its human *nature* and its life-situation, which is a blatant, outright and all-embracing denial of that very nature. (Marx 1978b, 133-134).

The human experience of alienation—of induction and bondage within the capital relation—is one of violent enclosure, occupation, enslavement, eviction, transportment, and detention. De-alienation, then, needs both the degrowthers' "economistic" reclaiming of the products and processes of production (re-appropriating land, storming the factories), but also the de-alienaters' cultural, spiritual, and social re-integration of people with their own and others' common humanity and with nature, the defense of the rights of which are a precondition of human species' survival.

In reconceiving the species-being, the process of de-alienation is a creative, resistance-centered project to resolve the class conflict and abolish the capital relation. “Extreme de-alienation,” then, would be the total replacement of the capital relation with “gendered commoning.” We have said elsewhere that this creative process is one of recollecting and reconvening the powers of fertility, especially peoples’ control over seeds, water, land, food, and fuel, and women’s (and men’s) control over our own bodies and labor. “De-alienation” tries to capture this double movement, of the reclamation of the earthly commons (necessarily entailing class struggle against enclosures) and the reconstitution of the social life necessary for human stewardship of those commons.

De-alienation is grounded firmly in peoples’ movements for what we would call ecosocialist, ecofeminist transformation. It is about confronting capitalist power with peoples’ counter-power in every circuit of production, consumption, social reproduction, and nature. We contend that this transformation, this double movement, is largely founded on women’s peace and subsistence livelihood initiatives (and very importantly, the support by some men of these initiatives). The Kenyan case demonstrates that this counter-power lies in part in social movements’ conceptions of peoples’ power in terms of “sovereignty”—i.e., constitutional right to control the resources of the country—and the varied urban and rural initiatives aimed at achieving this sovereignty through the defense and reappropriation of the commons.

Meanwhile, in Nairobi . . .

In his sweeping work on imperial famines, Mike Davis demonstrates that when hit by mass hunger, people rely on cooperation with kith and kin in order to collectively garner the resources to survive. But when conditions worsen, then collective capacities to subsist are weakened. Resources available to the people are reduced as these are monopolized by other fictive “persons” known as corporations. Amongst gendered commoners who share to subsist, the loss of resources means cooperation begins to disintegrate, and division over ever-scarcer resources intensifies (Davis 2001).

From urban slum-dwellers to desert-dwelling Pokot pastoralists, poor Kenyans who are already engaged in collective activity are now mobilizing to claim their rights and entitlements under law. The 2010 Kenyan constitution begins with a chapter entitled, “Sovereignty of the People and Supremacy of This Constitution:”

- (1) *All sovereign power belongs to the people of Kenya* and shall be exercised only in accordance with this Constitution. (2) *The people may exercise their sovereign*

power either directly or through their democratically elected representatives (Government of Kenya 2010, Chapter One, emphasis added).

By embracing “peoples’ sovereignty” as the cornerstone of the country’s new constitution, many “self-help” group members are conscientiously enlarging their vision of how to help themselves and others. They are thinking beyond their groups’ members and communities to imagine systemic changes to the whole of the regional and global political economy. In terms of the project of de-alienation, Kenyans’ systemic focus is part of their reintegration with the “species-being,” their reconceptualization of their individual selves as part of the universal “web of existence.” Just as these trends were emerging in Kenya (and everywhere), the Occupy the World Movement flowered on the terrain cultivated by the Arab revolution. The famed and much-loved African American actor-activist, Danny Glover, captured the unbounded joy of the 2011 global Jubilee of de-alienation in an impassioned October 17th statement at the Occupy Oakland site. What should the national and global protests be accomplishing?

It has to be a reimagining and a rethinking of what we mean by democracy. It must be a reimagining and a rethinking of what we mean by work. It has to be a reimagining and a rethinking about what we mean by education, and what we mean—what it means—so importantly, what it means to be a human being. What does it mean to be a human being?

What does it mean to be a human being in the 21st century? That’s what we’re talking about. That’s what we have to be. That is what we mean. But it’s not simply a revolution; it has to be a revolution and evolution and transformation. We have to be the change that we want to see. Are we willing to stand up for that? Are we willing to stand up for that? Are we willing to stand up there?

Young and old, young and old, it’s not only taking back our democracy. We have to remake it. We have to transform it. We have to build something better than that. That’s what we have to do. It’s let us down. It’s failed us. It’s failed us in our homes. It’s failed us in our communities. It’s failed us state by state.

But it’s also failed this fragile planet we live on, this fragile Mother Earth, which nourishes us. It’s failed us, too. We are on the basis of—we’re on the basis, right on the precipice of ecological collapse. And yet, it goes on. It talks about growth and development and growth and growth and making more money, transforming the commons . . . into private property and private wealth. It keeps doing that.

But we have to change that. And we have to be here tomorrow, the next day, the day after tomorrow, and the tomorrows after tomorrow, and not only to change it, but to ensure that its transformation is institutionalized. Just as the transformation into a country controlled by corporations has been institutio-

nalized, we have to take it back and transform it into one that is for the people, by the people, that works on behalf of the people, and works on behalf of the planet.

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